

THE DELICATE SITUATION



BY THE SAME WRITER:

THE TORTOISESHELL CAT
THE HOUSE-MAID
SKIN-DEEP
JOHN FANNING'S LEGACY
CHILDREN IN THE WOOD
THE LOVER
SUMMER HOLIDAY
THE ISLAND

THE DELICATE SITUATION

by

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LONDON

VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD

14 Henrietta Street Covent Garden

1931

First published April 1931
Second impression April 1931

Printed in Great Britain by
The Camelot Press Ltd., London and Southampton
on paper supplied by Spalding & Hodge Ltd.
and bound by The Leighton-Straker Bookbinding Co., Ltd.

To
KATHLEEN MARY CHRISTINA

“What has been strong enough to force these stones apart so that the path is too rough for me to walk on?”

“The tender grass.”

“From what did it spring?”

“From seeds as light as dust.”

“How did they come here?”

“On a breath of wind.”

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CHAPTER I

COUNTY BOUNDARIES

I

IN the course of such tuition in geography as was commonly given during the middle years of the nineteenth century the drawing of maps afforded a welcome if misleading relief to pupil and teacher alike. Seated in some quiet room at the end of a passage on the first or second floor of an English house, deep in a tree-shadowed garden, or isolated by parkland and meadow from the wandering roads that should be the first instructors in map-making, the young cartographer would labour with hair-point pen and a sheet of plain paper, seldom ruled in parallels of latitude or meridians of longitude. On these the child would work, inking in its first pencilled marks ; drawing rivers like earth-worms in action, and mountains like furry caterpillars ; dotting in towns, villages, and capital cities with impartial blackness and zeal. The aim of these labours was neatness rather than accuracy ; the result achieved being esteemed more for its artistic than for its scientific value.

At a more advanced stage, when the work of red and black ink and two mapping-pens could be supplemented and embellished by the aid of a water-colour paint-box and a series of camel-hair brushes, map-drawing passed from the region of almost entirely physical into that of approximately political consideration. A map of Europe would show a green France, a yellow Spain, with a purple strip of Portugal bordering on the usually smudged expanse of blue Atlantic. The red leg of Italy might kick its jagged toe into an equally red triangular island in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea. England, Scotland, and Ireland, too, were

likely to be as red as Italy, with Iceland balancing the green of France away in the top left hand corner and Scandinavia repeating the Spanish and Portuguese iridian shades against an orange Russia. The mosaic of Austro-Hungary, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands had to be so arranged as to leave a blob of some contrasting colour to mark off from Italy and France a small kidney-shaped space, easily overlooked in the calculations of beginners working inward from the coast. Switzerland was a problem in every sense. Even when enough room had been left between the boundaries of contiguous lands to indicate its existence, the space so formed was inconvenient both in shape and size for the accommodation of its inordinately long name. As for the fuss of mountains and the outlines of the lakes that filled it, they were enough to drive any child to tears, and tears are the last things that should be dropped on a map in the making. But to those rare and fortunate pupils who could handle ink and use water-colour without blotting the page, and whose own deftness gave them pleasure, such opportunities for the exercise of their skill were enjoyed and rewarded. Map-drawing, to these happy young persons, became as engrossing as the fancy work that was, too often, the absorbing occupation of the young lady as soon as she was emancipated from the schoolroom and had learnt to manage the fullness of her long voluminous skirts and to place the toe of her neat Balmoral on her croquet-ball in a manner that combined elegance of deportment with the will to victory when she swung her long-handled mallet in the rigours of the game.

In the schoolroom over which Miss Kathleen Quibell presided throughout the years during which she followed the profession of governess in private families, map-making was treated as an art as well as a science. The young woman had inherited and acquired educational theories as strong as they were sound. Her grandmother had called Penelope cousin. She herself had spent her eighteenth year in teaching and being, ~~as~~ in Fether's Kindergarten.

There was a reactionary strain in her English blood and partial upbringing which kept her faithful to Mrs. Markham and Dr. Brewer, but the elasticity of her mind and the frankness of her intelligence enabled her to make use of these socratic repositories of knowledge in a lively and entertaining fashion. But it was in the study and making of maps, a far more comprehensive and far-reaching business than that use of the globes which formed so unvarying an addition to the list of the young person's accomplishment, that Miss Quibell exercised her own tastes and developed those of her pupils with the greatest originality and success. No subject taught by her was safe from its accompanying maps. History, literature, botany, the French and Italian languages—each began and continued in the drawing, painting, and illustration of its appropriate atlas.

In the schoolroom of the Rectory at Queen's Beaton a map of the world—the joint work of the four Malory children—hung over the fireplace, and remained there long after Maud and Evangeline Malory had grown up, and John had followed his brother Richard to a preparatory school. But the unfinished relief-map of the Beatons, at which they had all worked in turn, went with Miss Quibell—when at Lady Dale's invitation she exchanged the comfortable sociability of the Rectory for the greater seclusion and heavier responsibility of Beaton Abbey. The finger of Dorset that thrust itself for a dozen miles into the Wiltshire flank was indeed a temptation to any aesthetically minded amateur. The little relief-map, in spite of some inaccuracy in the work of the amateur surveyors, and a certain creator's licence taken in the matter of the relative size of their own house and of other buildings, churches, cottages, or inns to which they attached importance, gave an excellent idea of the queerly self-contained territory it represented. Widening from little more than a mile and half across its northern end to a little less than three miles where the Beaton Clarence estate marked its southern boundary, the corner of country known as the Beaton

possessed almost the same attraction as any island surrounded by the sea has always exercised over imaginative minds. To Lena Quibell, who had ridden through its lanes, wandered over its commons, and picnicked in its woods and by its watercourses for ten summers, the whole isolated, self-contained tract of country had become as dear as if she were indeed a native there. She knew every winding of the River Beaton that watered it; every bridge that carried the high road up from the county town past Beaton Clarence and Abbot's Beaton, to end in the market-place of Queen's Beaton. She had spent many an idle moment watching autumn leaves turning in the whirlpool that marked the junction of the Beaton with the Malquoit as the latter stream flowed out of Malquoits Park on the northern side of the county boundary. She had driven along the road through Malquoits Park to reach the railway junction on every occasion when she had left the Beatons for her rare holidays.

There was no railway in the Beaton county; the combined influence of its three landowners had protected its fields and hamlets from the monstrous invasion of steel and steam. People who wished to travel by rail must drive north from Beaton Clarence to one junction, or take the winding road through Malquoits Park to another. Sir Marcus Seymour, who, with Mr. Bartram of Queen's Beaton Place, had been among the chief promoters of the scheme for bringing a gas supply to the Beatons, had also prevailed on the local authorities to allow the construction of a new road from Abbot's Beaton that shortened the distance to the Great Western Railway junction by six miles. This road drove with Roman straightness right across the map in a diagonal that cut the Beatons into two almost equal divisions. It had the Abbey at its foot, and its crown was the railway station, out of sight in the unmapped plains of the surrounding county. But the Queen's Beaton people always took the Malquoits road.

Lena knew it all : Beaton Clarence, where she had spent

one long summer holiday, talking French with Lady Miriam Horsley and her daughter while the Malory family went to the sea ; Queen's Beaton, with its spacious Rectory half way down the High Street from which she had seen Maud Malory go as a bride and Evangeline leave for a finishing school in Paris ; Abbot's Beaton, where a school-room had been ready for her when the Rectory needed her no longer.

Here for three and a half years she lived and worked and was happy in the love and progress of Lady Dale's nieces, Madeleine and Genevieve Seymour, the two daughters of a widowed colonel who had been wounded in the Crimea. Sir Marcus Seymour, during his convalescence and subsequent retirement from the army, took an active part in the education of his girls. It was under his direction that the governess and her charges modelled in clay a relief-map of the Crimea in the summer before Miss Quibell's work at Beaton Abbey was officially completed and the Misses Seymour were transported to London, to be astonished at, and admired by, the world of fashion through their first season in Town.

So great was the Colonel's appreciation of this work that he had it specially mounted on a special table and set in front of one of the smaller windows of his study, where, a housemaid having neglected to draw down the sunblinds during the whole month of August while the Colonel was in Scotland and Miss Quibell and her charges were at the sea, it dried and cracked into irreparable crevasses.

The discovery of this catastrophe in mid-September synchronised with the seventeenth birthday of the twins and with the arrival of a letter from their mother's sister, Lady Dale, pointing out that in the following spring the time would be ripe for dear Madeleine and dear Genevieve to come out.

His sister-in-law's letter threw Sir Marcus into a state of irritated depression. Lady Dale had always been a thorn in the Colonel's side. She was a pushing and officious

woman who had bullied her sister whenever the Colonel was out of the way. Miss Quibell, who had never seen Lady Seymour during her lifetime, supposed that certain faults of character she strove to correct in Madeleine and Genevieve had been inherited from or fostered by the aunt who had taken the little girls to stay with her when their own mother became seriously ill.

The Colonel had foreseen a delightful autumn at the Abbey, his days divided between the pheasants and the bench, and his evenings occupied in once more directing the construction of the Crimean relief-map in a more carefully prepared clay, and with the addition of features omitted and details forgotten when the now ruined work had been in progress. He had been surprised during the six weeks of his separation from his daughters this year to notice how much he missed them and their governess. They were, he told himself, growing up to be really intelligent and delightful companions. They were beginning to fill their dead mother's place in a way he had never supposed the spoilt, awkward children of ten they had been when she died would ever live to do. And Miss Quibell was largely responsible for this gratifying change. Miss Quibell herself was a most pleasing creature, elegant and high-spirited, about thirty-five years old, the Colonel supposed, and remarkably quiet and retiring for so intelligent and accomplished a woman. French, Italian, water-colour painting, the pianoforte—he enumerated her acquirements. The picture of her dark head, its hair smoothly parted and gathered into a chenille net at the back of her neck, presented itself most vividly to his mind's eyes. He saw the little collar of white embroidered lawn she wore, fastened with a large brooch containing a finely woven pattern in which her father's and her mother's hair were interlaced, set under a lenticular crystal surrounded by seed pearls and framed in gold. He saw the folds of her soft grey silk and brown merino dresses. He saw her long capable hands, the wide sleeves falling back from her arms as she worked on the clay under

his direction. He heard her low, pleasant voice replying to some suggestion of his own or directing the activities of one or other of the twins, and he was surprised to remember how agreeable in it the suspicion of a foreign accent, the slight buzzing of her "the," the faint trilling of her "r," really was.

After a time he realised that he awaited the arrival of the Tuesday post that brought him Madeleine and Genevieve's Sunday afternoon letters and Miss Quibell's weekly report of their health and holiday pleasures with a heightened anticipation that was by no means altogether fatherly. The sight of his own name in the governess's rather black but very decorative handwriting on the address side gave him an unusual sense of pleasure ; her spacing of the address itself, the upward and outward curve of the initial "S" of his name as she wrote it, were details over which he would linger for a few seconds before cutting open the folded sheet with the little blade of the ivory pocket-knife the twins had given him.

One day he realised, almost with alarm, that, although he thought about Miss Quibell so constantly, he could not remember her face. He could conjure up visual images of her dress ; hear echoes of her voice ; consider her actual handwriting. But her face was lost to him. She was dark, with a clear, pale complexion, fine eyes, good teeth—slightly prominent, these—a nose a thought too long he believed for strict proportion. All this he knew in detail : but from these details no composite vision would construct itself. It worried him. Was he, he wondered, growing old ? He wasn't very much over forty. He *felt* quite young. He was shooting well, eating well, sleeping well, enjoying life and the companionship of his host and fellow-guests, and yet there was this unaccountable failure to remember a face he had seen almost daily for several years—this extraordinary longing to be at home again. There was, of course, no place like home, and among the choice of homes the world had to offer there could not be, of this Sir Marcus felt more

and more sure, there never had been, a more completely satisfying place than Beaton Abbey. And, when thinking, or even speaking to a friend of his home and daughters, it was really quite amusing to realise how often his thoughts and words would return to the subject of that relief-map, the work of the long winter evenings and the lengthening afternoons of spring, the last completing touches to which had only been given at midsummer. He had actually spoken of it as something worth a visit. "You must come down to the Abbey and see it. My little girls are very proud of it. All made by ourselves. Fixed on a sheet of glass over green oil-skin to imitate the sea. Modelled in clay, all to scale. Hills coloured brown. Roads traced out in black; all the military campaign shown in red. A very creditable piece of work, and Miss Quibell—Maidie and Gennie's governess, you know—has fixed up flags and telegraph posts—matches and black linen thread—very clever indeed. I want them to do the Europe of Napoleon this winter, and they say they'll requisition the billiard-room for it."

So great was the Colonel's desire to be at home and map-making once more that he cut short his northern visit and reached Abbot's Beaton a week earlier than he had intended, only to find the Crimea a crumbled waste and the schoolroom already given over to a new construction at once smaller and larger, less military and more exciting, than that of the Napoleonic Middle Europe he had intended to impose. Flushed with the triumph of constructing a miniature relief of Bournemouth, Poole, and Christchurch, with their chines and cliffs and the long peninsula of Hengistbury Head, in the bathroom of the small house in Branksome Chine where they had spent their holiday month, the twins had proposed, and Miss Quibell had agreed, that the last six months of their schoolroom life should be devoted to an enlargement of Lena's old relief map of the Beatons, and should include every village, hamlet, barn, and outhouse, as well as the parks, gardens, and streams they knew and had frequented all their lives.

By the time the Colonel reached the Abbey an enormous trestle table had been assembled in the schoolroom and spread with sheets of cartridge paper, on which the preliminary work of scaling was already in progress.

Two cadastral maps of the Abbey estate, banished for years to the passage leading from the dining-room to the pantry, now displaced the smaller maps and charts and cases of butterflies and birds'-eggs that had accumulated on the schoolroom walls through three generations of collecting infancy. Alone of all its customary trophies, the Seymour Family Tree hung above the schoolroom fireplace; its root springing from the armoured loins of the crusading baron Godefroi de Beaton, its topmost bough bearing the twin shields of Madeleine and Genevieve in colours not yet faded to the tone of the rest of the picture.

"You see, Papa," said Genevieve, always the more articulate of the sisters, "it is years since there has been any proper map of the Beatons. We're far behind Malquoits in that respect, but they've got no *relief*-maps at the Castle. I asked Mr. Martin about them last year when we had our confirmation lessons."

Sir Marcus bore this change from the military to the domestic scene with a resignation the more cheerful that he found himself invited to direct some of it during the morning rides on which he accompanied his children and their governess two or three times a week.

The suggestion of outshining the Malquoits equipment he dismissed as a piece of girlish frivolity. Malquoits was, and always would be, above and apart from the Beatons, over the border, in the next county, and out of any running all the Beatons put together might attempt to make. He had supposed that they would leave Malquoits out of their map until he came upon Madeleine, who had always been very neat-fingered and ingenious, cutting out and pasting together tiny arches and turrets and painting them to resemble the yellow sandstone of the colour plate in a volume of *English Castles* which lay open on the table before her.

"Oh, yes, of course, Papa," said Madeleine in answer to his question, "this is the Castle. Lena is doing the Abbey herself, and we are going to put Beaton Clarence House in too. That little Staffordshire night-light shade from the nursery is just like it."

Sir Marcus felt a sudden glow of satisfaction at the news that the Abbey itself was to be carried out in pasteboard by Miss Quibell. It was, he assured himself, particularly nice-minded and devoted of Miss Quibell to consecrate herself to so intricate, and in the circumstances, so important a feature of their little undertaking.

For a week all was curiously joyful. The golden, still weather of September, unchanged from day to day, favoured the work of amateur surveying, and the Colonel found himself, morning after morning, neglecting the business of the estate in order to ride or walk to some outlying hill-top, some field through which the county boundary ran, so that note-books and sketch-maps might be made rich and accurate stores on which to draw when the darker, stormier days should bring the indoor work of modelling to its first clayey stages. He even refused an invitation to shoot the Beaton Clarence partridges and kept this departure from his annual routine a secret from his daughters, going so far as to suggest a change of plan for the day in question and ordering the waggonette and picnic baskets to take them to the old mill-pond that marked the northern boundary of the Beatons, six miles away from the last fence of the Beaton Clarence coverts.

The twins' birthday marked the close of a period which, for the rest of the Colonel's life, was, in the words of Mr. Tennyson's beautiful if rather daring poem, "to orb into the perfect star we saw not when we moved therein." For the Colonel's part, he could not say that he had not realised at the time how happy he was. It was the cause and nature of that happiness he had not in the least understood.

The day opened well with the unpacking before breakfast of a small crate from Neuchâtel, where Miss Quibell had

cousins. It contained a set of the smallest Swiss chalets known to the toymaker's art, and a series of minute *bergeries*. From these, farmhouses, trees, and microscopic cattle were to be selected and set aside to be used rather as symbols than as models of their prototypes.

"Isn't it fun," said Genevieve, "to think that we are making all this fuss over a piece of the country that is only the tiniest little loop on the atlases? It just shows how misleading all maps generally are."

"All but Lena's," said Madeleine, "and Papa's military charts, of course."

"What's that?" said the Colonel, putting down his coffee-cup and folding a letter that had engrossed him for some minutes.

"Only about the map. Lena's lovely, lovely present, Papa. The dogs are as big as the cows, and the cowherds are too big to go into any of the sheds or farmhouses. No one ever puts people on a relief map, do they Papa?"

"No," said Sir Marcus. He spoke explosively, as though he were angry with his children.

Madeleine and Genevieve exchanged glances. They wished Lena had not had her breakfast sent up to the school-room in order to leave them and their father alone for their birthday morning, with all its intimate business of opening letters and packets from aunts and uncles that must inevitably recall the days when their mother shared this dearest and happiest of anniversaries.

"Oh, Papa," sighed Madeleine.

"You're not cross," begged Genevieve, "not cross with us on our birthday?"

"What has your Aunt Amelia sent you?" The Colonel spoke as though his sister-in-law were a not too pleasant phenomenon for which his daughters were alone responsible.

"We haven't opened them yet," said Genevieve. "They're rather small parcels."

"In registered envelopes, though, with her seal," said

Madeleine, taking up the long, narrow package that lay with several still unopened letters by her plate.

"They look like sticks of sealing-wax."

Genevieve clipped at the string of her packet with the little gilt-handled scissors that hung from her waist on the elegant châtelaine given her by her father that morning.

But their Aunt Amelia had not sent them sticks of sealing-wax. The long, narrow parcels contained long, morocco jewel-cases, in each of which, on pale blue velvet, lay a necklace of small but beautifully matched pearls.

"Look, Papa!" and "Pearl necklaces, Papa!" exclaimed Aunt Amelia's nieces, forgetting their astonishment at Papa's crossness in their own pleasure over their gifts.

The Colonel took another drink of coffee and recovered his temper. "Very pretty," he agreed. "She's had them made out of the longer one your mother wore. The clasps are her own gift. You're to wear them when you come out, next May."

"Not till then?" grumbled Genevieve. "Oh, we must wear them just for to-day. It's such ages till May."

"May will come soon enough," said her father, rising and putting Aunt Amelia's letter into the pocket of his riding-coat. "Run along and get into your riding-habits. The horses will be round at ten."

He did not tell his daughters what it was that had so upset him in their aunt's letter. No need to spoil the day for them as it had been spoilt for him. Why couldn't Amelia leave things alone?

"The girls must come up to Belgrave Square after Christmas," she had written, "for their dancing lessons and other things, and to get their clothes ready and to give their maid an opportunity of learning to dress their hair in the fashion, unless, indeed, dear Marcus, you agree with me in feeling that perhaps a French maid would be better for them now than that excellent country-woman who was looking after them so nicely when I was last at the Abbey. Have you warned Miss Quibell that she should be looking for other

employment for next year ? I fear not, knowing you so well. But I daresay the sensible creature has thought of this for herself."

"Warn Miss Quibell " indeed ! Sir Marcus walked up and down in front of the house switching at his riding-boots like any little boy in a temper. "The sensible creature." What did Amelia mean by calling Miss Quibell sensible and a creature ? Warn ! warn ! Servants gave their warning. A groom had "giving warning " last week. Miss Quibell had no such idea in her head. She thought of nothing but the relief map at the moment. Wait a minute, there had been something, some suggestion that, as this was the last piece of work the schoolroom would undertake, they would not have time to patch up the Crimea. She did know then. And yet she seemed quite happy, rather happier than usual ; more, now he came to think of it, as though she were waiting for something to happen, waiting for some really pleasant and exciting thing to happen. Sir Marcus stopped switching at his boots. He put his riding-whip under his arm, pulled his hat further over his eyes, settled his stock, cleared his throat, and became a grown-up man once more. And not an old man either, nor at all a plain man, nor, suddenly, a man who did not know his own mind.

Amelia and her absurd phrase, "the sensible creature," had done it. The object of his now almost continual thought changed her name in the two seconds that saw his change of attitude. The angry boy became a man, and "Miss Quibell " was "Lena " to the father as she had been to his children ever since Madeleine, on her fourteenth birthday, had chosen for her birthday treat the privilege of calling the governess by her Christian name.

So strong was the emotion this discovery aroused in the Colonel's breast that he was actually relieved to see his two daughters appear on the steps of the house dressed for riding, and without Miss Quibell, who generally accompanied them even when he was of the party.

"Lena's not coming this morning," Genevieve told him

as they rode off together down the drive ; " she says to-day is a holiday for her as well as for us."

A holiday for Lena ! She needed a holiday from them—from the girls, and from him ! Was it possible ? During all the time she had been with them she had never been away from the Abbey for more than the week at Easter which, for the last two years, she had spent at Queen's Beaton with her friend Miss Martin. Once, indeed, there had been an idea of letting her go to Switzerland to visit her brother's family for the summer, but that had fallen through because, at the last moment, Amelia hadn't been able to take the twins to the sea with her own children after all. It was Amelia again, always interfering and then failing to undertake her own part in the arrangements she had insisted on making. The poor gentleman's mind swayed from one woman to the other : from Lena Quibell, who needed a holiday, to Amelia, who was planning to send her away altogether, to send her to live with God knew what kind of people, to people who would never treat her with the kindness, the consideration, the love—that was it, the *love* she found at the Abbey. He admitted it at last. The peace and contentment, the interest and pleasure he had been taking in the progress of his daughters' education resolved themselves kaleidoscopically into one complete and starry pattern that had very little to do with the girls who were now riding on either side of him. It had for its centre and circumference the idea of the tall, graceful figure moving somewhere, in the house, in the gardens, walking perhaps across the park in a different direction from which the riders were taking, withdrawing from that family circle she was so fitted to complete.

" You must not be cross, Papa, because Lena has not come out this morning." Madeleine was speaking. " She stayed at home for our sakes, so that we could have you all to ourselves to-day."

" You surely did not make Miss Quibell feel that her presence would be unwelcome, my child ? "

"Oh, no, Papa. We wanted her to come."

"Still, you know," put in Genevieve, "she was quite right in a way. You do take more notice of us when Lena is not there."

"Did she say so?" The Colonel almost shouted the question.

"Lena thinks it only right and proper. She will be with us again at tea-time when we cut the birthday cake. And, if the clay for the map gets here this morning, she will ask William to spread it on the table so that we can begin modelling to-morrow."

They rode on under the yellowing trees and out across the main road into the lanes winding down to the valley that ran like a trough from end to end of the Beaton country. They dismounted on a grassy bank of the river to eat their sandwiches, and took the bridle path through Beaton Clarence woods up to the common for a gallop on their way home to tea. The girls were happy and excited. Their chatter distracted him from the revelations of his heart well enough to enable him to make a good show of answering them. But it was not until they had reached home, and had changed out of their riding-clothes and were all assembled in the dining-room, that Sir Marcus felt that life was satisfactorily enjoyable again.

The little festivity of the day was entirely domestic. Since Lady Seymour's death, two days before the twins' twelfth birthday, the custom of a young people's tea-party had been abandoned. Lena Quibell, although she had not known their mother, had shared with the widower and his children the melancholy anniversary of the first birthday, and had been alone with the little girls during the anxious months of the second, when their father was in the Crimea. On this occasion she had made a cheerful innovation. In consultation with the *chef* she prepared a surprise in the form of a cake ringed by coloured candles, a custom familiar to her from her own girlhood in Germany. This was out in the presence of the assembled household

staff, and portions of it were sent out to the stables and lodges. For this the birthday tea was delayed until six o'clock in order to give greater effect to the candlelight than could be obtained for it at the normal tea hour of half-past four.

To-day, with the knowledge that this was the last birthday Madeleine and Genevieve would spend as children, Miss Quibell had lavished a greater care than ever on the preparations for the ceremony.

The cake, in three iced tiers, was ringed at its base by seventeen wax candles in frosted sockets, from each of which a tinsel cord rose, to be tied at the apex round the stem of an engraved specimen glass holding two long-stemmed white roses carefully nursed for the occasion and cut that afternoon by the head gardener himself. It stood on the sideboard, its elegance mirrored in the tall glass that hung on the wall behind it, and supported by two large and branching silver and crystal epergnes filled with grapes and peaches. The heavy silver tea-tray presented by his tenants to the young Sir Marcus at his coming of age and the ornate tea service to match which had marked their recognition of his marriage six years later had been removed from the green baize recesses of the pantry that morning, and now sparkled above the pink Sèvres cups and plates and the plated cake-baskets and jam-dishes disposed on the glistening white damask of the cloth. The primrose gleam of slightly overlapping rows of the thinnest bread and butter ; the almond-studded crispness of macaroons ; the rose and yellow and white of sugar biscuits ; the dark gleam of strawberry, apricot, and greengage jam, fed the eye with promise, while the shining domes of muffineer and covered dish offered suggestions of hot cakes and buttered toast to the imagination of appetite. The feast, spread in the fading glow of the sunset that filled the sky outside the windows, had a gay and fantastic air of being at once too crowded and too frivolous for its heavy setting. The big dining-table, its leaves withdrawn and hidden, was now only

an oval island in the expanse of a room designed to accommodate a score of dinner-guests. The landscapes and battle pieces that hung in vast gilded frames on its deep crimson-papered walls seemed adornments too consequential for the innocent festivity about to take place below them. The deep pile of the Turkey carpet rose around the feet of the four chairs placed at table, as if to steady them for the occupation of important people about to settle down to the long business of a ten-course banquet and the grave drinking of good wines. Weaves, the butler, moved in and out with an air of conscious benignity, a concealed smile as of one aware of an occasion that warranted the transference of a purely drawing-room or nursery meal to a scene from which all traces of the intrusion would be removed as soon as it was over. He had just accomplished the folding of the carved Indian screen that masked the service door, in order to make room for the servants to stand by the sideboard to witness the cutting of the cake, when Miss Quibell came in to see if all was in readiness, and to light the candles.

She wore a dress of plum-coloured cashmere, its wide skirt and open sleeves bordered with ruchings of velvet of a darker shade. The neck was cut out to show an underbodice of cream batiste trimmed with little frills of lace : undersleeves of the same material covered the wrists where the long outer sleeves fell away from them. A gold watch-chain hung round her neck and fell to the little velvet watch-pocket at her waist.

Taking a lighted taper from the butler's hand, she crossed the room to the sideboard and began to hold it to each pale waxen shaft until the bud of blue flame that grew and wavered at its pointed tip rose and steadied and became a cone of light as the cup of liquid wax deepened around each kindled and charring wick.

She had lit all but three of the candles when Sir Marcus, entering through the open door of the adjoining library, saw her, and paused on the threshold without speaking, so that she was unaware of his presence. The walls of the

room still glowed warm in the dusk, from which the red of sunset had not yet faded. The frames of the pictures caught gleams of daylight and flame from the candles and their dancing reflections in the mirror behind them. The curves of the silver and china on the sideboard were starred with soft reflections. He watched her as she stood holding her sleeve back with one hand, leaning a little over the ring of light to reach the candles on the further side of the cake, and saw her quiet face a little flushed with the pleasure of her task, her mouth half smiling, so that the lips parted over her white, slightly prominent teeth, her eyes sparkling in the candlelight that set a sheen of bronze in the close bands of her dark hair.

It was the first time he had seen her that day, the first time he had been in the same room with her since he had realised the nature of his own feeling toward her. Now, as he watched her, that feeling seemed to him to be an old and cherished affection, part of his life that had endured as long as his own acquaintance with this dear and gentle beauty that was revealing itself to him as a new and yet familiar grace. He had not recognised it for what it was, this tender friendship, this slow admiration and acknowledgment of excellence so different from the anguish and delight of first love. Now, faced with the imminent possibility of losing her, he knew that Lena Quibell had long ago consoled him for the loss that had seemed unbearable until she came, and that would become unbearable once more were she to go when the task that had brought her to the Abbey was completed. In the few seconds that elapsed between his entrance and Miss Quibell's recognition of it, the memory of his first wife swept over him, bringing no sense of any infidelity with it as he formed the resolve of asking this other woman, not to supplant her, but to take a second place in his heart and life. His only surprise was that the idea had not occurred to him before. If Weaves had not been hovering about at the back of the room he would have asked her then and there.

But the white wick of the last candle had blackened, the flame that lit it had sent its tiny tear of wax running transparently to thicken and congeal half way down the shaft, and Weaves, exclaiming rather than enquiring "Ready, Miss!" was ringing the gong in the hall before the Colonel had had time to do more than clear his throat by way of announcing his presence to the lady. The twins, who had been waiting on the staircase for the summons, entered in all the splendour of new tartan dresses, made over larger crinolines than they had yet worn. In the stir and bustle of admiring the effect of their costume, with the different ribbons used to distinguish Madeleine's dress from Genevieve's, the moment passed and, with it, its precipitating impulse.

As the festive hour wore on, the Colonel was able to tell himself that there were many points to be thought over before he was quite ready to make her his offer. He had, after all, plenty of time in which to prepare himself, and Miss Quibell, for the proposal. The possibility that she might not accept it never entered his head.

2

Two days later the halcyon weather broke into wind and rain and a flying of autumn leaves. The schoolroom forsook its holiday freedom and returned to its studies. Mistress and pupils emerged only for an hour at noon for a breathless and generally rain-sodden walk; they retired from the drawing-room punctually at half-past nine every evening, when dinner had been followed by a little painstaking music and a rather limited discussion of such portions of the news in yesterday's *Times* as the governess had chosen to read aloud to the twins after schoolroom tea. The Colonel was present at the evening relaxation if he had no engagement to dinner, or to some public meeting in the district; but he could no more attempt to share the morning walk than he could invade the studious hours of the day. The

routine so well planned, so excellently followed all these years, now appeared an intolerable restraint. For a week he fretted and sought some way of asserting his authority in order to bring about a change. He suggested to Miss Quibell that, since the girls were almost grown-up, they might be allowed to relax the severity of their working hours. He was met by a protest from his children that they were so engrossed in getting the clay of the map ready for him to superintend its later stages, and so deep in the last chapters of *Consuelo*, that they simply hadn't a minute to spare. Miss Quibell, waiting for the outburst to wear itself away, then made the unexpected reply that she entirely agreed with the Colonel's suggestion, and felt that the time had come for accustoming her pupils to the duties that would soon replace their lessons. The girls might very well, she thought, be allowed to play hostess for their father from time to time at small luncheons or dinners, if he cared to give one or two during the autumn. She herself was anxious to spend a day with Miss Martin at Queen's Beaton in October, and her absence would provide a good opportunity for the twins to make their first tentative experience as grown-up young ladies.

This was not at all what Sir Marcus had wanted. Miss Quibell, indeed, seemed to be almost deliberately leading away from his purpose, withdrawing herself when he was trying to approach her. Perhaps—the self-consoling idea came readily—she was behaving in the traditional manner of the nymph and retiring in order to be pursued. This seemed an unlikely manoeuvre on the part of a woman of Miss Quibell's age and sense, but, on second thoughts, it appeared to be a correct one. No gentleman, the Colonel reflected, could propose marriage to a lady residing under his own roof, who had no other established place of refuge, if, as seemed improbable, she rejected his advances. A night of sleep brought him the solution of this problem. He would ask Amelia to have Miss Quibell and the girls to stay in Town for the shopping and the dancing lessons they kept

talking about. He himself would go up to Brown's, and conduct the final stages of his courtship as an attentive visitor to his sister's guest.

The idea pleased him so much that he agreed to issue invitations for the proposed luncheon in order to make it clear to the lady that her every suggestion was welcome. Having devoted a whole morning to writing notes of invitation and to the composition of a letter to his sister, he took the further step of ordering a large bunch of early chrysanthemums to be sent up to the schoolroom for Miss Quibell, with his compliments. He waited for Amelia's reply in the happiest spirits.

No answer could be expected from London for three days, but none came for a week. All the invitations to the luncheon had been accepted with pleasure before Lady Dale's reply arrived. She was sorry to refuse her brother's request, but her time and thoughts were now so fully occupied with the *pressing* duty of lending all her influence to oppose and avert the *dreadful danger* of auricular confession. Marcus *must* have heard, even in his backwood, of the criminal behaviour of the creatures, she would not call them men even though they were still clergymen, Mr. Poole and Mr. Temple West ; he must understand how *she* felt about it——

The Colonel, who had, without any great emotion, added his signature to a memorial on this subject that was receiving mild support in the neighbourhood, put down the letter without reading it to what he could see was its agitated and increasingly italicised conclusion. Thus it was that he remained unaware of his sister's offer to write herself to Miss Quibell explaining that, as the twins would be amply occupied and chaperoned when they came to Belgrave Square in January, their governess might consider herself free to make other arrangements after Christmas.

Here was a pretty state of things ! And the singular part about it was that the woman whose whole future was in the balance seemed quite oblivious of any difficulties in her own situation. The twins constantly discussed their coming

emancipation without any apparent concern for the consequent parting from their governess which Lady Dale took for granted. And although Miss Quibell herself never spoke of any share she herself might be taking in their adventures, neither did she openly or indirectly refer to her own withdrawal. She went about with the same serenity as ever : she seemed if anything to be happier than usual.

Sir Marcus put off the consideration of any further steps until after the luncheon-party, the arrangements for which were discussed now every evening after dinner. On the evening before that event, waiting at seven o'clock for the ladies, he was annoyed to see his two daughters enter the drawing-room unaccompanied by their governess.

"Lena has gone to Queen's Beaton," the twins informed him in reply to his question. "Have you forgotten, Papa, she is leaving the party entirely to us? She won't be back till to-morrow. We're nervous now, but it will be fun when she gets back to-morrow night. We shall enjoy telling her all about it at dinner!"

But there was very little left to tell by the time all four sat down to dinner again the following evening, so detailed and repetitive had the twins' afternoon chatter been ever since Lena's return soon before schoolroom tea. Sir Marcus was able to report that Madeleine and Genevieve had conducted themselves with grace and decorum, and to add, with a faintly embarrassed emphasis, the assurance that Miss Quibell had been missed, and the hope that when the occasion repeated itself she would not again be absent. A smile was the only reply he obtained; but, when the girls had bestowed their good-night kisses on his cheek and he was holding the drawing-room door open for the three ladies, Miss Quibell paused to let the twins go on without her and asked if she might have a few moments' private talk with him.

"What do you suppose it is about?" said Madeleine

as the study door closed behind their father and Miss Quibell.

Genevieve leaned on the balustrade of the gallery that ran along the first floor on either side of the staircase.

"Can't you guess?" said Genevieve rather scornfully. "She's telling him about Miss Martin and Mary Paradise and that she's going to leave us at Christmas."

"Oh, Gennie, that was a secret."

"From him, not from us. Papa will have to know in the end."

"Yes, I suppose so. But it's very sad. I'm sure he'll be sorry."

"He'll be worse than sorry," said Genevieve wisely.

"He'll be cross. Ever since he got back from Scotland he's been cross if she isn't with us. Haven't you noticed it?"

"I hadn't thought of it, but, now you say so, I do remember. He must be as fond of her as we are. Do you think he'll be permanently cross when she's gone?"

"How dreadful it would be! Papa cross all the time, and nobody but Aunt Amelia to defend us!"

"Oh, Gennie, couldn't Lena be persuaded not to go? Do you think Papa will try?"

"If he was not so old," Gennie pronounced, "I should think he would ask her to be his second wife and our second Mamma. Lena is younger than Mamma was, I know that."

"But has not the Queen forbidden second marriages?"

"She cannot *forbid* them. Look at Lady Frodsham. She's Sir Reginald's third wife."

"But she is not at all nice. Not like Lena. And is not Papa too old? Is forty-three too old for a second marriage?"

"Almost," declared the oracle.

"They'd have to be engaged," Genevieve reflected, "for at least three months. And they'd have to get old Mr. Quibell's consent all the way from Neuchâtel. That would make another fortnight before they could even be engaged, even if he gave it. He's a Protestant pastor, and admires the Queen very much."

"Well, he's only her uncle. She might disobey him."

"I don't think Papa would like her to do that. I don't think Lena would do it. Don't you remember that piece she made us copy out of Miss Charlotte Brontë's book about laws and principles being made for the times when soul and body revolted against them."

"Oh, dear," sighed Madeleine, "how difficult it is! I used to think everything was easy and delightful for grown-up people. Do you suppose our souls and bodies will revolt, Gennie?"

"Oh, I daresay," said Gennie. "After all, we were not at all resigned when Mamma died."

"Yes, but we did not revolt—we only cried a great deal."

"We quarrelled, Maidie, because you cried more than I did."

"I shall cry when Lena goes, even though she's only going to Queen's Beaton," Madeleine promised.

"I daresay I shall cry too. But we can ride over and see her every day when it's fine enough."

"They are having a very long talk, Gennie. Are we going to hang over the banisters till Lena comes out? She will not like it if we do."

"We'll go to bed," Gennie decided, "and talk ourselves awake till she comes up."

"Shall we leave a note on her pillow to come in and say good night?"

"Capital," agreed Gennie, and, holding up their crinolines in front, they joined hands and ran round the gallery and squeezed together abreast down the corridor to the schoolroom wing with a great swish and rustle of silk and frills and some laughter because the passage was really only wide enough for one large crinoline at a time.

3

Down in the study, Lena and the Colonel faced one another from deep leather-covered arm-chairs on either side of the bearskin hearthrug in front of a bright fire.

For a moment neither of them spoke. He was making a conscious effort to remember that, because she had sought an interview at this unusual hour, his own self-imposed silence on the one question that now filled his mind must be rigidly maintained. He was quite sure now that his desire for her presence, his determination to secure it permanently arose from a deep and genuine attachment. But his sentiment had grown from respect, had deepened into admiration, and did not yet partake of the headlong quality of passion. Indeed, as he looked at her sitting with downcast eyes, her long, beautiful, clever hands folded quietly over the wide flounces of her dress, he began to wonder whether he could at any time summon up the courage to lessen the distance that separated him from this creature, so calm, so totally unaware of the desires that were prompting him to speak.

Presently, as if a little oppressed by the silence, she gave a sigh, and, lifting her gaze from her lap, turned her head and looked at the fire that crackled and flamed up the wide chimney and threw out gleams along the bar of the bright steel fender and up the shining legs of the ornamental pair of tongs.

Still the Colonel waited. He was happy enough to be sitting there with her, almost as if she were already his wife. He hardly felt any curiosity about the matter on which she had come to him. He had been out shooting until dusk, and the half-hour in the drawing-room with his daughters had been just long enough to produce that pleasant feeling, that is not quite somnolence, so likely to follow the enjoyment of a second glass of port. The feeling, indeed, was so pleasant, and so very near drowsiness, that when at last Miss Quibell began to speak he paid less attention to what she was saying than to the pleasure her rather slow and careful enunciation and the even cadence of her clear voice gave to his ear.

She was speaking, as he had foreseen, of the termination of her duties as governess to the twins, but he paid little

attention to her words because of his own inward debate. Should he defy convention and, taking the opportunity she herself had made, speak at once ; or would she, who had so wisely taught the principles of decorum and the virtue of restraint and consideration for others to his children, be alarmed and offended at such a taking of advantage ?

As he wavered, some sense of what she was telling him broke through the preoccupation of his debate.

" It gives me real happiness "—he caught her words now—" very great satisfaction to feel that I shall not be very far removed from the Abbey. The girls will, if you have no objection, often ride over to see me. I shall hope to visit them from time to time, so long as they remain at home."

" You have "—the Colonel blinked a little in his embarrassment at having missed the fact that lay behind this conclusion—" you have made definite arrangements for leaving us ? "

" Miss Martin would like me to join her at Christmas time. Her lease was renewed in September, so my own responsibility has already begun."

" You are sharing Miss Martin's house with her ? "

Miss Quibell's face expressed a faint surprise, but she spoke as though the question were a natural one.

" Perhaps I am not clear. I did not mean to trouble you with details of my own affairs. Yes, Miss Martin has asked me to make my home with her. The advantage will be mutual, as she could not afford to remain on alone in the Little Chantry House at Queen's Beaton and I shall require a home for my niece in a year or two."

" You do not then contemplate taking any further situation—with young people ? "

" No, Sir Marcus. I have been very happy in my work so far, and very fortunate. A legacy from my brother-in-law Mr. Paradise of Bristol, leaves me morally under an obligation to his child, and I have during the years of my service here and elsewhere made economies that will enable me to take my full share of my friend's expenses, and "

enjoy a liberty which alone has been lacking to my complete happiness."

The Colonel looked wonderingly at the beautiful, melancholy face of the woman who was still young enough to seek for happiness elsewhere than in the companionship of another woman many years her senior. He knew Miss Christina Martin by sight; she was the sister of Mr. Thomas Martin, the old curate of Queen's Beaton, who had died the previous winter. He had heard that she kept some kind of library or shop. He could not believe that Lena Quibell meant in all seriousness to bury herself for life in so hopeless a cul-de-sac. Besides. . . .

"Miss Quibell," he said, leaning forward in his chair so that the firelight shone on his lean and weather-beaten face and showed the grizzling on the temples of his thick, fair hair and of his close-cropped moustache.

"I have sometimes wondered why you chose the life of a governess at all." He paused, his rather prominent light eyes met hers in an honest and appealing gaze.

"Teaching was the only profession open to a woman of my age and attainments when I decided to adopt it," she replied. "Had I been ten years younger during the war I might have joined Miss Nightingale at Scutari as a volunteer. Indeed, when the news of my small inheritance reached me last spring I was tempted to offer myself. But lack of training and my real attachment to Madeleine and Genevieve stood in the way."

"I'm glad of that, very glad," said the Colonel hastily. "But what I meant was not that. What I meant was, in short, Miss Quibell, have you never thought of marriage?"

She did not change colour, and, in the slight pause before she spoke again, he had a queer feeling that his question was not quite unexpected; then she said:

"Years ago, when I was a girl, I had the hope of marrying. But that hope did not prosper. That is one reason why I came to England."

"You mean you had a disappointment?"

"That is one way of putting it, yes."

"Still, time is a great healer; other ties might present themselves. . . ."

"None that I should care to make."

"But if comfort, security, position were offered you?"

She drew herself up, and her hands clasped each other more tightly in her lap.

"They are great things," she said, "and any woman might be proud to have them offered to her, but, even if such an offer were made to me, I could not consider it. When I was young I saw the possibility of a complete abandonment of my own life to that of another. Then it was possible. Now I see, in place of the security, the comfort, the advantages you have named, something that has become more desirable to me than almost any other state. I mean liberty."

"Liberty!" said the Colonel. "For a woman?"

"Yes," said Miss Quibell, and now her colour rose and her eyes shone. "Particularly for a woman. I have been a child, obeying parents; a girl, under instruction; a young woman held for a time in the bondage of the heart; and then, for years, the servant of my employers, of the kindest, most considerate of friends—I know, and most gratefully admit it; but, happy as I have been, and most particularly here with you and the children, I have not been free."

"You won't be particularly free, so far as I can make out, if you are going to burden yourself with half a house and Miss Martin. Doesn't she keep a shop now? You can hardly propose helping her with that—going into business. . . ." He was profoundly shocked at the idea of such a departure from the sheltered life.

"As a friend and partner: and the life will be of my own choosing."

"Would not a husband be better?"

"I cannot think it. I cannot desire to give my devotion, to make vows of obedience, to become the lifelong dependant of anyone, even of the kindest and most indulgent

friend. If you will allow me, Sir Marcus, to speak to you of my deepest feelings. . . . You have been so kind. . . . I should like you to know. I have never felt, I am persuaded I shall never again feel, any affection strong enough to obliterate certain impressions which, even now, have the power to move me greatly."

Sir Marcus rose to his feet and began walking up and down the room, clearing his throat discreetly as he reached the window on the farther side.

"It seems a pity," he said, returning to the fireplace where she sat. "A great pity that you can't forget the fellow. Still, fidelity is a fine thing, a very fine thing, especially in a woman." He was now back in front of the window-curtain again, and the photograph of his wife that stood on the writing-table there caught his eyes. "But there is no real lack of it, no reflection on past happiness in the search for consolation."

To these reflections Miss Quibell made no direct reply. The Colonel was plainly thinking aloud. When he reached the fireside again, she began to discuss the arrangements for her own departure and the twins' instalment in London with their aunt. It was agreed that she should take them up to Belgrave Square immediately after Christmas, and return to the Abbey only to remove her own belongings from there to the little house in Queen's Beaton where she had chosen to make her home.

When he had closed the door after her retreating skirts with the deliberation necessary to avoid trapping a fold or a flounce or the swaying crinoline that travelled so far behind its wearer, Sir Marcus Seymour did not settle down to the reperusal of *The Times* that had reached the Abbey only at four o'clock in the afternoon. The news from India was still meagre. He had read the telegrams. Delhi had not fallen. Outram had joined Havelock. There was nothing definite yet. No news from Lucknow. The suspense was unbroken by any event that need distract him from his own domestic and sentimental crisis. He felt excited

and relieved. Not in the least as he might have expected to feel on learning that Miss Quibell had disposed of her own fortunes without any reference to his desires. It was, he realised, a good thing he had not committed himself. The dear lady had no idea of his unspoken intentions. His own irresolutions were ended. And, now that they were over, he could see them in a better and truer light. Why had he hesitated? Were not his scruples about embarrassing her by a proposal while she was without the chaperonage of an older, or at least of a married woman, really the warnings of a prudence he had for the time disregarded? This talk of liberty, this making light of solid advantages, were they altogether desirable in the lady he could make his second wife? And there must be some fundamental indelicacy in the mind that could, not of necessity either, propose to have anything to do with shopkeeping. He must not forget that Miss Quibell had foreign blood in her veins. She had been brought up partly in Switzerland among republicans and reformers—Rousseau's country, it was. She had charming but rather unusual ways of teaching. And it wasn't only that. On his return from the Crimea he remembered discovering that the new governess, installed by his sister in his absence, was inclined to make a hero of that brigand Garibaldi. That had annoyed him a little, but he had let it pass, as he had done another thing—the day when she had checked Genevieve, who was calling Nana Sahib “a bloody monster.” It was bad language, of course, and a young girl should choose her expressions more carefully. Still, for his own part, he had not been sorry to hear the child speak out, and it seemed to him that Miss Quibell was a little out of sympathy with them all that day. They were small matters, but straws, he reminded himself showed which way the wind blew.

She was an attractive woman. How well she looked, in that plum-coloured dress, and in the brown Lyons silk some Swiss relative or other had sent her! Much more elegant than many a governess he had seen, and without any of the

nervous self-effacing awkwardness that made some governesses such a trial at table or in the drawing-room. A lady, undoubtedly, but a little foreign, perhaps *not* altogether the wisest choice. He had much to be thankful for in having had his eyes opened before he had committed himself. When he reflected that, but for his own perspicacity and self-control, he might at this very moment be an engaged man, he realised how much a soldier owed to the habits of discipline and foresight proper to his calling. Miss Quibell had seemed attractive enough, was certainly most admirable in the society of his twin daughters, but, when you got her alone—and that, after all, was the true test of womanhood—she became hard and decided ; quite unwisely, in short.

He sat down and opened *The Times*. His eye fell on a paragraph concerning the life of the French Court at Biarritz. "The Villa Eugénie." "The Empress Eugénie." There was a woman ! A lovely, feminine creature. Colonel Seymour had had the honour of a few moments' conversation with her when she and the Emperor were in England last year. What grace ! What charm ! What yielding loveliness under all her dignity ! She had known how to rise in marriage. She had not preferred a so-called liberty in obscure surroundings. The comparison was a little strained, perhaps, and more than a little unfair, seeing that he was still happily convinced that he had made no proposal to the lady who was about to become a shopkeeper, and therefore, that she had not had the opportunity of rejecting him.

4

She had said good night to the twins, and had satisfied them that their father now knew of her plans and had raised no objection to the proposal that they should visit her at Queen's Beaton ; but she did not immediately retire to her bedroom. The interview with the Colonel had left her a little strained and restless. She was glad that she had so

easily staved off the proposal she had seen was imminent ; thankful that she had spared herself the distress and the Colonel the mortification of a refusal. And yet, now it was all over, now that she had made her own decision irrevocable and closed the way to the life of material ease and dignity and protection that might have been hers for the taking, she felt a momentary but very real regret.

In common with most energetic and strong-minded people, she suffered her indecisions after instead of before the event. While it was yet to be accomplished, her determination to prevent the Colonel's offer had not wavered. Now that that frustration was definitely made, she became the prey to misgiving.

Was it not inertia rather than a genuine desire for freedom, that had prompted her to choose the smaller and more restricted life ? Was she not shrinking from the effort the change in status involved in marrying the Colonel would impose upon her ? Was it not more gratifying to her pride to be in some degree the benefactress, sharing the work and making possible the continuance of her friend's life, rather than to receive the benefits of security, with their inevitable consequences of envy and of opposition in the circles in which she would have to move should she become Lady Seymour ? Was there not after all, a root of selfishness in the heart which could cherish the image of a first love to the exclusion of any later affection ? Had she not refused to console a kind and a lonely man who was facing the imminent breaking up of a second and most considerably fostered domesticity ? The twins, rich, pretty, and well born, would inevitably marry before long, and their father was still young enough to be entitled to seek many years of happiness with a second wife. His choice had fallen on her. She was vain enough to believe that. She did not owe his intention entirely to propinquity. There was no exaggerated humility in her decision against him. She knew herself to be worthy of his trust and capable of inspiring affection. He was a kind and in many ways a charming man.

His evident liking ; something rather innocent and appealing in his attitude towards her ; the hour she had just passed in an almost conjugal intimacy with him troubled her senses and clouded her judgment. Should she return to the library and re-open the discussion of her plans ? It would be as simple a matter to lead him on to a spoken confession of his feeling for her as it had been to prevent that confession from being spoken just now. She could make it a condition that her niece Mary Paradise should live with them when she came to England. Christina Martin would find some other friend to share her life. Madeleine and Genevieve would be so whole-hearted in their welcome of her as a stepmother ; it would be so real a satisfaction to them, and to her, to put Lady Dale entirely out of control of their actions in the coming spring, that she would find many compensations for the anxieties and problems of her position. But, though once she started for the door of the schoolroom where she was now sitting, she got no farther. Her vacillation was not profound. It did not arise from any real infirmity of purpose. It was no more than the quivering of a weight settling down in its socket after it has been thrown. The effort of confirming by declaration the resolve she had formed after thought and self-questioning, had shaken, but had not changed, her purpose. With a sigh she closed the door she had half opened, and, crossing the room, went over to the trestle table where the relief-map of the Beatons was now well advanced towards completion.

Taking a folded spill of paper from the vase on the chimney-shelf, she lit it, at one of the gas-jets burning on either side of the fireplace and, shielding the flame in her hand, she carried it across the room to the wall-bracket that held an engraved glass globe between the windows. The expanding flame from the gas-burner, like a wide-palmed, short-fingered hand, shattered the black tinder of the burning paper, and one flake of it fell on the map that stretched across the whole width of the room, almost touching the wall on either side. As she bent to remove it before it should

stick to the yet undried surface of the painted clay, Miss Quibell noticed with an almost superstitious thrill that its sooty brittleness palpitated over the tiny cardboard structure she had made to represent the Abbey. Was it an omen, she let herself wonder for a moment, this trivial accident that obliterated the place in which she had lived and worked and found a home and so much real affection and happiness, within an hour of her own refusal to remain there for the rest of her days?

Smiling a little at her own folly, she selected some pliers from the tray of tools that stood ready for the next day's work on the model and removed the charred scrap from its resting-place.

It was her custom to stand thus looking down on the long table for a few minutes every evening, noting the progress of the day, deciding on the work next to be undertaken. To-night her attention wandered. She did not see what was still to be added to the model beneath her gaze. For the moment it seemed a completed thing, taking on life, becoming the panorama of her existence during the ten years that were gone, showing her the chosen scene of the rest of her life to come.

Lena knew that in refusing Sir Marcus, and leaving Abbot's Beaton in order to throw in her lot with Miss Martin, she would be taking what such people as Lady Dale would consider a step downward in the social scale. But, in her estimation of values, the opulent security of the Abbey and the fond but circumscribing companionship of her two not very intelligent young charges, weighed light in the balance when set against the advantages her change of life had to offer.

She had lived for three years at the Rectory in Queen's Beaton, and knew what glimpses of life—the society of the little town afforded. Miss Martin's library in the Little Chantry House was in its way the centre of the town's mental activity. The box from Mudie's that arrived there once a quarter was a link connecting the Squire and Mrs.

Bartram at Queen's Beaton Place, and the Grimthorpes of High Warren, and other landed proprietors, with the circle of dwellers in the town itself. These included not only the Rector, now a widower, and Dr. and Mrs. MacFarlane, and the two Miss Lindens, but also Miss Dobbs, the confectioner's sister, and old Mrs. Wantage, and half a dozen wives of yeomen farmers and country clergymen round Queen's Beaton, who, though not frequenting one another's houses, met on a basis of intellectual equality when exchanging books at Miss Martin's library table.

Only the Castle, nearer to the library than any other dwelling, never made use of its modest service. Malquoits was divided from Queen's Beaton as securely as if the county boundary that ran between the Castle and the town were the great wall of China armed and manned with sentinels and guns. There had been a day—Lena herself had seen its final stages—when a fragile link between the Whiggery of Queen's Beaton and the dangerous political atmosphere of Malquoits existed in the persons of two old gentlemen who for some years had kept the Squire and his family out of Queen's Beaton Place. The great-uncle through whom George Bartram had inherited the property had been a bachelor of strongly Royalist views, views which he had not hesitated to put into practice when the French Revolution sent so many of the friends of his own gay and ubiquitous youth into exile in England. At that pity-compelling time Queen's Beaton Place had been thrown open to two gentlemen of the French nobility who had escaped and reached Plymouth, whence they communicated with their English friend, and were by him received into what turned out to be a permanent asylum.

The old man, dying some fifteen years later, had left will enjoining his long hospitality on his heir, and young George Bartram, lately married, was faced with the first some project of bringing his bride to a home over which two aged and exacting foreigners had legal and sentimental rights. The situation was complicated by the fact that the

Marquis de Frissac and the Comte de Belleu were both on the best of terms with the Castle, where, as it was only too well known in the Beaton, Legitimist plots of the most serious and reactionary kind were in process of incessant hatching.

So, being a Whig of very sensible disposition, George Bartram betook himself to the Dower House, a comfortable Queen Anne mansion that stood in its own walled garden half way down High Street, and waited until death or the discovery and failure of their own plotting should remove his charges from the house that was his at present in name only.

Time and the fortunes of kings did combine to bring this freedom. M. de Frissac, at the age of eighty-six, died of rage after the *coup d'état* which dethroned an Orléans only to set a Bonaparte on the disputed throne, and a year later Gaston de Belleu voluntarily quitted Queen's Beaton Place to take up his residence at Malquoits, a move which merely covered his almost immediate flight to join the Comte de Chambord in Spain.

The general post that followed was a solution of the Squire's difficulties : it enabled him to live in his own house and to turn the Dower House into a Rectory large enough to accommodate the whole Malory family. Its final and most satisfactory result was the establishment of the Martins in the Old Rectory or Little Chantry House in Castle Gate. Here Miss Martin's library grew and prospered, and here for a few months the quavering voice and unsteady footfall of M. de Belleu could be heard as, morning after morning, he came out through the high wooden doors in the wall of the Castle and made his way to the library, there to exchange one novel of Paul de Kock for another. The old gentleman had come upon this treasure trove by accident where it lay among other books of a library purchased by the stationer in Market Square. Learning that the good and ingenuous Miss Martin had transferred it, with other literature of a less stimulating kind, to the enlarged premises

so fortunately near to his own quarters, the old gentleman had enlivened the tedium of his existence in the gloomy Norman tower put at his disposal by his absent hostess, Lady Gervaise Towyn, by a course of reading the nature of which little Miss Martin, if she suspected it, steadily ignored. That had been years ago. Lena herself had been young and shy and almost a foreigner herself. She was then but newly come as governess to the Rectory, and, though amused at the tale and touched by the age and misfortunes of the poor gentleman who moved so slowly over the cobblestones in the sunlight of a fine morning, she had not ever spoken to Miss Martin about him. M. de Belleu had vanished into the mysteries of his Royalist destiny long before Lena's own friendship with the little librarian had begun. And with his departure all direct communication between the Castle and the town had ceased. Next week, when she went to join Miss Martin in her work, there would be no book to set aside for any dweller on the other side of the line that separated the counties where Malquoits touched Queen's Beaton, and each, so far as possible, ignored the other.

So deep-rooted was the custom of the Beatons in regard to the assumption that its lordly and Catholic neighbour did not exist that nothing but the Beatons was included in Miss Quibell's original map. But when the modelling of the larger plan rose gradually from the broad water-meadows of Beaton Clarence through the narrowing valley, and then made a steady three-mile ascent to the hill from which Queen's Beaton faced the view, it was impossible to leave Malquoits Castle out of the scheme it so insistently dominated. It would have been easier to leave out Beaton Clarence House, which really lay almost outside the Beaton valley, and was the only estate that had any link with the Castle in the person of old Lady Miriam Horsley, the present baronet's mother, and cousin to the late Lord Malquoits.

The county boundary ran through the Castle courtyard.

The Norman gate that opened at the top of the High Street was in the Beatons, and gave its name to Castle Gate, the little plateau on which the church and the Little Chantry House stood. The main buildings of the Castle stood on the Dorset side and faced south, dominating the long slopes of the park through which the road wound down to the Malquoits river. The drive was bordered for two miles with double rows of chestnut-trees, the direct descendants of a hundred saplings from Chiavenna brought to Malquoits as part of the dowry of that Loelia de Salis who had married the fifteenth Baron Malquoits in 1772. This avenue was shown on the slope of clay that supported Queen's Beaton hill. Lena was glad they had put the chestnut avenue into the map. In the days when she had been governess to the Rectory children at Queen's Beaton, the days when her own heart was still undisciplined and its grief insistent, she had often walked alone under the chestnut-trees by the broad flowing of the Malquoits river and found a measure of consolation in that level solitude. No other feature of the Malquoits side of the boundary had been indicated beyond the point where the drive reached the river bank and ran alongside it out of the map. But the chestnuts were represented by double rows of splintered matches coloured green above black stems, and looking very much like palm-trees. Lena felt a special tenderness for the girl who had made them so carefully as she noticed their stiff and almost comic precision. Madeleine, she remembered, had always manifested a curious interest in Malquoits and its withdrawn, mysterious life.

As she stood looking down on it, Lena Quibell smiled indulgently on the little group the girl had cut and painted and arranged with so much dexterity and with one wilful exaggeration for which the governess had not had the heart to reprove her. For, whereas the market-place and the half-dozen streets of Queen's Beaton were executed with some regard to proportion, and the Castle itself was no more conspicuous in the artificial miniature than it was in the

al scene, the Chantry House that overlooked the churchyard had been made larger, and had been finished with greater detail, than any other building except Miss Quibell's own model of the Abbey itself.

The black and white of beam and plaster work ; the three gables of the second story ; the little porch, even the lattice of the windows, were shown. A minute gate stood in the wall that separated the garden from the churchyard. Hollyhocks were painted on the side of the house : a pin, its head wound round with pink silk and thrust through two shreds of green paper, represented a standard rose-bush beside the porch. The churchyard itself lay between the garden of the Little Chantry and the high wall of the Castle courtyard, with the church, a borrowing from one of the Swiss villages, placed beyond it to the west. Gravestones, cut in thick letter-paper, stood under the branches of a tree, which took the form of three grey green-tipped downy feathers from a peacock's breast tied together to represent the great horse-chestnut that was the pride of Queen's Beaton and its assertion of the town's independence of the Castle, where Spanish chestnuts alone flourished.

It was Madeleine's gesture of devotion, this care and ingenuity lavished in representing the house where her beloved Lena was henceforth to live. The tiny structure had been prepared in secret and set up as a surprise. It dominated the little plateau of Castle Gate.

"I've made the tree from our own Juno's moulting because I know how you'll love to watch it from your bedroom window, and I want it to remind you of the terrace at the Abbey which you saw when you got up every morning," she had said.

And Lena Quibell, with unusual demonstrativeness, had drawn the girl to her side and kissed her with tears in her eyes.

There were tears in her eyes now as she looked at the little tribute. She was sorry to be leaving the place where she had given and found so much affection. And yet, the
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life to which she was going ; the friendship and service it offered her ; the sense, at last, of being about to enter a home she could call her own, and of sharing an equal interest there, was stronger than her regret. The impulse to return to the kind and simple man whose offer she had just rejected, had died away. She faced her quiet future with contentment.

CHAPTER II

THE EMPORIUM

I

Miss Christina Martin was not a native of Queen's Beaton, though she had lived there for twenty years, first in two rooms over the stationer's shop in Market Square, and later in the Little Chantry House on Castle Gate. She was the late curate's sister, older than he was by an unspecified number of years, and his only immediate relative. He had brought her with him to Queen's Beaton when he first came to assist the young Rector, Mr. Malory, only to find that a shortage of house-room prevented their living together.

This dislocated and uncomfortable state of things might have annoyed a less humble man than Thomas Martin or a less cheerful lady than his sister. But they were so grateful to a providence that had not separated them more completely, and so persuaded that the Rector and the Squire would one day find them a joint home, that the years they spent apart only served to augment the pleasures of their domesticity when it was at last accomplished.

They were the only children of an Oxfordshire parson who had married for love the daughter of a prosperous yeoman farmer of the marches. She proved a good but not very companionable wife. As a mother she had been kind rather than wise, spoiling her son when he was a boy and repudiating him in his dreamy and unpractical youth. She died before Tom had taken his degree, leaving Christina to keep house for her not very prosperous father and for the gentle, studious boy, then a Scholar of Oriel.

All the sense of the Martins and the Pristys together had, as Mrs. Martin often observed, gone to Christina, who was as lively and practical as Tom was mild and vague. Her mother never recognised that, though Christina could sew and cook and keep her clothes spick and span, she, in her own way, was as unworldly and romantic as either of the men of the family.

Religion to Thomas Martin was a matter entirely of faith as opposed to works. He had entered the Church because, being the son of an evangelical parson, he could not enter a monastery without causing pain to his father ; but he had none of the gifts that make for advancement in any calling, and his convictions, though strong enough to get him into trouble, lacked the propulsive force that makes sainthood militant or brings a rebel to leadership. No sooner had he taken Orders than he became involved in the Tractarian Movement. This alienated any influence his father might have had in the circles of his own profession, without making his adherence to the movement of weight sufficient to attract attention to the merits of his sincere and unselfish faith. Fortunately Mr. Malory, who had known and loved him when they were both at Oxford, had obtained the living at Queen's Beaton very early in his own most practical and sensible career, and, needing a curate to whom he could offer the very modest emolument the living carried, he bethought him of Tom Martin, his senior by several years.

The Rector never regretted the offer which brought Mr. Martin to Queen's Beaton. For that gentle creature neither neglected the duties among the lowliest parishioners assigned to him by the urbane and sociable Rector, nor attempted to impose his own ritualistic tendencies on anyone who could take alarm at them. And not only was he content to live in the two-roomed cottage behind the church with extremely little help from the sexton's aged mother, who undertook to "do" for him, but he was responsible for the arrival in Queen's Beaton of his sister Christina ; and that,

as everybody soon recognised, was a very good thing indeed.

Christina Martin was quite the most unusual figure Queen's Beaton had ever seen. She was short though not very slight, and her arms, which were long in proportion to the rest of her figure, gave her occasionally an odd air of being a very charming monkey dressed in female garb. This suggestion was born out by the mischievous alertness of her small, snub-nosed face. But her eyes were blue, and the crisp hair, which she wore in bunched curls on either side of her face, had been golden in youth, and, though a little dulled by time, was not yet grey. Her complexion, still pink and white, her face, a little puckered and lined, but without wrinkles, gave her the appearance of a middle-aged and much cherished doll, so that it was often disconcerting in conversation with her to find the absurd creature delivering herself of the wisest and most emphatic opinions. Disconcerting, indeed, was the term most often used by people when speaking of their first encounter with Miss Martin. Later, when the acquaintance had ripened, the epithet changed, and the talk with her would be described as entertaining and delightful or, when a personal confidence had been given or professional counsel had been sought, as sympathetic and kind.

For Miss Martin had a profession of her own—two, in fact. She was an expert embroidress, and she had, soon after her arrival in Queen's Beaton, taken on the management of the small library that circulated in a dusty and sluggish manner from half a dozen shelves at the back of Mr. Robertson the stationer's shop.

On her removal to join her brother in the Chantry House she came to an arrangement with the stationer by which the library business was transferred from the market-place to the semi-private advantages of the paved Chantry, with a side door opening on to the Castle Gate, that had been used as a parish room and was now superseded by a building erected near the new Church schools.

The main staircase of the house ran up between two walls beyond the hall and opened out through a low archway in the gallery that ran round three sides of it, giving access to the two attics used as boxrooms and to the bedrooms that faced southward, overlooking the churchyard and the Castle walls. A doorway in the wall opposite the entrance led to the staircase, the kitchen, and the living-rooms of the house. A glass porch on the left of the hall opened into the garden, and served to augment the light given by an oval window in the front gable and the two smaller sashed ones on either side the street door.

Here Miss Christina, her household duties accomplished and the activities of a young servant named Matilda having been directed for the day, would take up her station at ten o'clock every weekday morning.

She sat in or near the glass porch that, on sunny days, warmed as well as lighted the hall with the imprisonment of heat from the south. In winter that source of heat was supplemented by the rather dangerous activities of a short, round, iron stove that stood out from the fireplace, now no longer open. This utilitarian object thrust a black elbow backward into the piece of sheet iron that closed the draughty chimney-place and spread its four small feet like claws on the old hearth-stone. It was an uncertain little monster. Sometimes it lit at a touch and burnt with a fury that reduced the wood it consumed to white and flying ash with extravagant and alarming speed, growing red hot in the process and impossible of approach. At others, sulking and noisome, it refused to be kindled, turning the coal and tinderwood with which Matilda coaxed it in the chill of a winter's dawn into clouds of sulphur-laden smoke and acrid wood-fumes that filled the whole house and brought even Mr. Martin out on the gallery in his night-cap and slippers to ask if the house were on fire. On these occasions Miss Christina herself would grapple with the dwarf, banishing Matilda and resorting to practices not only forbidden to, but almost concealed from, the maid. But Matilda knew ;

though she did not make any show of sniffing the strong, soft smell of burnt paraffin in the hall, or of missing the old rag of dry dish-cloth that had always vanished by the time the stove had accepted its dose and become a consumer and not a rejecter of fuel again.

But, whether warmed by the sun or half roasted by the stove, Miss Martin sat every morning at her embroidery frame from ten till twelve o'clock, stitching gold thread over padded monograms on stoles or alms-bags, adding fringes to a book fall, or working a pattern of vine and corn across the hem of a pulpit hanging or a vestry curtain. From time to time she would be interrupted by the arrival of a visitor (no one ever entered Miss Martin's workroom twice under any other title), someone who wished to exchange a book or to match a skein of silk or to enquire about a set of patterns, or to inspect the progress of some piece of work in hand.

"Library and Emporium" was what Miss Christina herself called her establishment. The words headed the letter-paper on which she wrote long and circumlocutory letters of explanation to her clients at such times as it became expedient for her to submit a statement of her account against them. Money was never mentioned in the Library and Emporium, nor did Mrs. Bartram herself, when she came to consult Miss Martin about the set of chair-covers she was working in blue and red Berlin wool, ever attempt to pay in naked coin for the fresh skeins she carried home with her to Queen's Beaton Place.

"I wonder if you could possibly let me have——" or "Have you the time to advise me——" were the openings recognised by Miss Martin and her visitors as leading to the actual purchase or the contemplated order. Sometimes, before leaving, the visitor, with a nonchalant gesture, would place a sealed envelope on the table, saying perhaps, "An answer to your note, Miss Martin," or again not saying anything at all. And sometimes the visitor—and it was usually a gentleman when this happened—would say, "I haven't

heard from you yet about the altar frontal or the Sunday-school banner we all admire so much." And then Miss Martin would draw in her little chin as if she were bowing to herself, and, looking up over her spectacles, would answer rather rebukingly, "I shall be writing to you in *due* course."

The fiction that Miss Martin was, as it were, playing at shop in the Chantry House in order not to disturb her brother in his study on the other side of the passage, broke down when it came to her supplementary activity. A long table—no one had ever dreamed of calling it a counter—ran down the side of the room opposite the fireplace. The wall behind it was filled with bookshelves. A large tome in which Miss Martin entered the names of the books taken out by subscribers with a well-feathered quill pen occupied the centre of the board. A glass bottle of violet ink stood on a deep willow-pattern soup-plate beside it. An expanse of pink blotting-paper was flanked by a small box that always contained change for a florin.

On one end of the table, copies of the *Cornhill Magazine*, the *Quiver*, and the *Ladies' Magazine*, six months old, afforded entertainment to those who might be kept waiting for a book ; on the other were displayed such volumes from the quarterly box sent down from Mudie's Select Library as were not out, and, being in, had passed the censorship of Miss Christina's eye.

By some process of reasoning the results of which only were discernible to those who observed them, the taboo placed by Miss Martin on any mention of money in connection with Church embroidery or mundane fancy work vanished completely when it came to the question of the library. Visitors to the needlework department between the dwarf stove and the glass porch became subscribers as soon as they crossed the room and asked for a book. Miss Martin would discuss with the utmost freedom and clarity the terms of subscription, varying from the fee for three *new* books (she underlined her speech with a sweeping gesture of

her left hand) and that for one child's book a week. She drew an almost visible line between fee, or subscription, and price. The former could be made the subject of open and pleasant talk ; the latter was unmentionable. Nobody who asked the price of a cross-stitch pattern or the cost of the wool and silk necessary for the execution of a piece of embroidery could ever hope to become a subscriber to the library. Nor, if you asked its price, were you likely to obtain the desired article. It would suddenly become a private possession of Miss Christina's own, with which she had no intention of parting on *any* consideration whatsoever.

This peculiarity might have discouraged custom in other places, but it made little if any difference in Queen's Beaton, where there was no competition and where the ladies who sought Miss Martin's aid were as delicate-minded as herself. Every lady in the Beatons did fancy-work, and, though the Vicar of Beaton Clarence denounced all Church embroidery as Popish and therefore sinful, he did so in his own parish ten miles away, and in no wise prevented the Beaton Clarence ladies from driving over to the emporium for their private ends whenever they wished.

But the business, though it kept the little lady occupied, was not a very lucrative one. She had no assistant for the Church embroideries she executed, and could only keep up with the orders that came in by dint of devoting all the time she could snatch from the library and the secular needlework department. These, though they flourished, did not pay much, owing partly to Miss Martin's intermittent failures to distinguish between wholesale and retail prices. She was further handicapped by the serious obligation she felt towards her library subscribers of making herself acquainted with the nature and content of every new book added to her permanent stock before she issued it to any but the oldest and wisest readers.

Miss Martin was not narrow-minded, but she was conscientious. When a book seemed to her unsuitable for

general reading, she did not exclude it from her library. The doubtful volume was sewn into a yellow linen cover and placed on a shelf that could only be reached by climbing the small step-ladder never mounted except by Miss Martin herself in search of a book, or by Matilda, who could not read words of more than one syllable, and never touched a book except when she dusted the shelves once a fortnight.

The books thus placed out of bounds were a miscellaneous assortment, representing nothing but Miss Martin's whimsical and arbitrary prejudice. Some of them she had never even read. Many of them were never asked for by any subscriber : but it gave her satisfaction to keep them interned, like undesirable aliens with the novels of Paul de Kock that had once salted the dullness of M. de Belleu's exile. The works of Fielding and Smollett, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Godwin's *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, together with an uncut copy of *The Rights of Man*, had been transported to the emporium among the original stock of the stationer's library. Recovered in yellow for sequestration on the shelf, they were joined, as time went on, by two very strange novels by that strange writer Curren Bell, and, later, by the early works of the Rev. Charles Kingsley, a clergyman with whose mind Miss Martin felt her own to be in the closest sympathy. *Westward Ho !* was given the freedom of the lower shelves in spite of a certain broadness of language that was a little repugnant to her own taste : but *The Angel in the House*, on which Miss Christina passed judgment at the same time, was placed with the yellow books. The author of this poem, she felt, went into far too much detail about earthly love. *The Princess*, by Mr. Tennyson, was as explicit on this subject as Miss Martin thought good for any reader. She herself did not care much for poetry, except that of Sir Walter Scott, and she considered the intercourse of the sexes a matter to be deplored in life, and, except in its sublimated and more spiritual aspect, to be ignored in literature. The poems

of Lord Byron were not put in yellow in the library and emporium ; they were not admitted to it. Foreign authors were sparsely represented. But the novels of Alfred de Vigny, Victor Hugo, and Freytag were allowed to circulate as freely as they could, and *La Petite Fadette* and *La Mare au Diable* were admitted to the same liberty as *Paul et Virginie* and *Une Année dans le Sahel*.

But the main business of the library consisted in ordering, distributing, and returning the books from Mudie's, and here Miss Martin was obliged to go through another of those incomprehensible mental processes the results of which were so definite to her mind and so difficult and occasionally so annoying to those of her subscribers who looked for reason in her conduct. It being physically impossible to read thirty volumes between the day when the carrier was known to have delivered the new box from Mudie's at the emporium and the following morning, when a demand for new books, asked for weeks ago, was inevitable, Miss Martin resorted to subterfuges that varied in speciousness and range. Certain books she put by to examine herself ; others were handed to her brother, whose tastes were more catholic and whose prejudices less severe than her own. A few by authors of established purity were released at once. Certain readers, too, might ask for blasphemy or for the novels of Mr. Kingsley and meet no denial. The Rector, for example, had his own half-dozen novelties straight from the van, and passed them on to Mrs. Bellamy at Quince House without opposition. And copies of the new instalment of any tale by Mr. Charles Dickens would be released as soon as they arrived, which they did in their monthly courses, not waiting for the quarterly box. But over the residue there were often delays and impatience and heartburnings—sometimes even the kind of acrimonious and heated discussion which is afterwards spoken of by the participants as "a few words."

It was on one of these occasions that the friendship between Miss Martin and the governess at the Rectory began.

Miss Quibell had stepped across from the Dower House one spring afternoon to match some silk one of the Malory girls was using to embroider Mrs. Malory's initials on a pincushion for her coming birthday, and, entering the emporium, discovered Miss Martin in full controversy with the doctor's young and very pretty wife. Seating herself at the far end of the library table, Miss Quibell drew last December's *Quiver* towards her and began to turn over its pages. But, though she tried to fix her attention on the magazine before her, she knew that it was impossible to be within earshot of what Miss Martin said at any time and not to be aware of its import.

Mrs. MacFarlane had evidently asked for some book, and, though a copy lay on the table before her, she was not allowed to take it away.

"The book is *new*, Mrs. Macfarlane. I have as yet had no opportunity of looking it over. For all I know it may have to go into a *yellow* cover."

"But Dr. Macfarlane ordered it for me himself," objected the little lady, drawing her fringed cashmere shawl rather stiffly over her slender shoulders.

"Has he *read* it himself?"

"Oh, but how could he, Miss Martin? It is quite a new book. He read of its publication in *The Times* and asked me to read it."

"Because Dr. Macfarlane is a kind and indulgent husband—though he has no *time* to judge for himself—I cannot take advantage of the trust placed in me *by* him when he recommended your reading to my care. I cannot let you have this book to-day. To-morrow, perhaps."

"Oh, but I'm going to Exeter to-morrow. I wanted to have it to read in the railway train; surely a book by Mrs. Gaskell . . ."

"The most decorous writers stray at times. This book has a title, *Cranford*, that may cover a very different theme from that usually chosen by Mrs. Gaskell in her other tales."

"It is said to be a very pretty book," pleaded the foiled young lady.

"My brother *may* be able to look at it after tea."

Miss Martin was clearly dubious about this.

Miss Quibell rose from her chair and took a step towards the disputants.

"Forgive me," she said, "but I could not help overhearing. Would it be of any assistance to you in your difficulty, Miss Martin, to know that I myself have already read this book of Mrs. Gaskell's? It was sent to me by a friend, and I have handed it over to Evangeline Malory, who is only seventeen, even younger than Mrs. Macfarlane."

"Besides," put in Mrs. Macfarlane, "I am a married woman, and that makes *such* a difference."

It was evident that, if the Rector's daughter were not too young to read *Cranford*, the doctor's wife must be accorded equal liberty. Mrs. Macfarlane went off, thanking Miss Quibell very prettily for her intervention.

When she had gone, taking the book with her, the two censors of literature fell into a discussion that ended in Miss Martin's proposal that Miss Quibell should occasionally report on some new book she might have read before Miss Martin or the curate had found time to pass it for local circulation. Miss Quibell received the idea, within limits, and out of it grew the habit of a regular colloquy between the two ladies. Soon it became an established habit for Miss Quibell to take tea at the Little Chantry House once a week, whether there were any new books to be discussed or nothing but the exchange of opinions on the news of the day to form the subject of conversation.

Mr. Martin usually joined the ladies at the tea-table in the little lattice-windowed, low-panelled dining-room that looked out over the churchyard beyond, and was darkened and shaded all through the summer by the heavy branches

of the chestnut-tree rising higher than the house only a few yards on the other side of the garden wall. He was a quiet and godly man, whose mind, when not occupied with a work on the Christian mystics left uncompleted at his death, was inclined to relax into a whimsical and rather elaborate humour, completely intelligible to his sister but a little disconcerting to anyone unfamiliar with the generally recondite themes that occasioned its ebullitions. But Lena Quibell took her place so easily in the family intimacy of the Martins that not only did she soon learn to follow the windings of the curate's allusive jokes, but established out of her own studies and experience new and equally elaborate sources for an extension of them.

It was a real grief to brother and sister alike when the Rectory schoolroom closed and Lena Quibell betook herself to Abbot's Beaton, and so put an end to the weekly confabulation. But the deprivation of their regular intercourse gave a deeper zest to the enjoyment of the more protracted and so more endearing pleasure of the week at Easter which, during the period of her stay at the Abbey, she had spent with them. The little low-raftered bedroom, with its white dimity dressing-table and silver candlesticks, was an austere delight to her after the rather sombre comfort of her carpeted and curtained room at the Abbey, lit by gas and furnished with padded and buttoned chairs, marble-topped tables, and replete with wardrobes, chests of drawers, and swinging mirrors. A faded pastel drawing of Christina Martin as a child of nine, apple-cheeked and round-eyed, her chubby shoulders rising out of a sprigged muslin frock, her curls astonishingly full and regular on either side of a smooth parting, hung over the little fireplace of the spare bedroom, that was filled winter and summer alike with a gush of white and gold paper shavings. Two large, very prickly shells from some South Sea coral strand stood on the chimney-shelf below the picture, the tender pink of their lining repeated in the roses on the wallpaper and the exuberant mats of very fluffy

crochet work that stood under every article of the white and gold toilet set on the dressing-table.

Almost from the first night she slept there Lena Quibell knew that one day she would call that room her own, and, if her means had allowed her to do so, she would have fallen in with Mr. and Miss Martin's tentative offer of a share in their home when it was first made. But she was too wise a woman not to fear that her presence might occasionally be felt burdensome to the brother and sister who understood one another so perfectly, even if other scruples had not forbidden her to become in any sense a dependant on their slender means.

It was the coincidence of the curate's death with that of Mr. Paradise that fixed Lena Quibell finally in the determination to share the rest of her life with her friend. The small legacy she inherited eased the financial aspect of such a partnership, and made it possible for her to reconcile the dictates of her heart with the promptings of conscience.

The arrangement pleased everybody. Nobody gave it a more whole-hearted sanction than the Rector himself, who, ever since the sudden death of his own wife in London on her way home from a holiday in Belgium at the height of the cholera epidemic of 1852, had been haunted with an uncomfortable feeling that he might have to offer Miss Martin a home should he decide to replace her brother by another and more active curate. And Miss Martin, though a treasure in the emporium, was not a lady the easy-going Rector wanted to see in any position of authority in his own household. Her standards of conduct were not merely high; they were incalculable: they marked no level that other people might hope to reach, but soared unexpectedly, to descend again with even greater unexpectedness, so that to-day's virtue might be offset by to-morrow's indulgence. Or, again, it might not; you never knew with Miss Christina Martin. It needed, the Rector often thought, a saint like Thomas Martin to live in peace with so disconcerting a righteousness as hers.

So Evangeline, who had returned from her finishing-school and was not going to marry her young soldier lover just yet, kept house in a joyous and inconsequent way at the Dover House, where she taught her infant sister Georgina to read and write and drop very pretty curtsies : and the Rector himself worked a little harder in the parish to make up for the increasing exemption from duty which the state of poor Tom Martin's health made necessary.

And then Thomas Martin died, quietly, as he had lived, after evensong on Ascension Day, and the whole problem became, for a week or two, very acute indeed, until Lena Quibell solved it in this most convenient and delightful way. Between them the two ladies were prepared to pay an annual rental for the old house sufficient to enable the parish to allow his new curate a stipend that would enable him to live in lodgings in the town, a thing the new curate was only too ready to do. Mr. Simpson was an energetic young man of strong evangelical convictions. He welcomed the opportunity offered by a conversational landlady for becoming acquainted with the names and situations of his new flock. So there was no need for the Rector to offer a home to Miss Martin. If it had been Miss Quibell—but Miss Quibell was not the kind of person who could be asked to become a housekeeper, and Georgina was too young to need a governess of her standing and attainments. To have her again in Queen's Beaton was a pleasure to them all. Evangeline was made very happy in the knowledge that her old friend and governess would be at hand to sympathise with her in all the tremors and preparations for her approaching marriage. It all fitted in most beautifully : the emergence from the schoolroom of the two Misses Seymour ; the little fortune left to Miss Quibell ; the discovery of an energetic young bachelor—Mr. Simpson, a fervent evangelical likely to be much liked in the parish—who did not want so large a house as the Little Chantry to himself ; Evangeline's wedding fixed for the end of April, when Mr. Simpson would have settled into his work ; Miss

Quibell near the girl for three whole months beforehand ; Miss Martin happy and consoled for the loss of her brother ; nothing on his conscience whatsoever. The Rector looked forward to the New Year with great satisfaction.

3

Nothing would have surprised Mr. Malory more than to be told that, of the two ladies now living so happily together at the emporium, Miss Martin was the less difficult to understand. Nor would he have believed you if you had added that, whereas by the end of three months there was hardly an episode in Miss Martin's conscious life of which Miss Quibell remained unaware, Miss Martin's knowledge of her friend's history was incomplete in respect of several of its most interesting pages. Miss Martin knew that her dear Lena was the elder daughter of a Swiss professor of languages who had married an English wife, and that she had spent three years of her girlhood in Germany, during which period it had at one time seemed probable that she would marry into an exalted sphere. Some trouble concerning the younger sister, who had been an unusually beautiful girl, had put an end to Lena's hopes. Madge Quibell had eventually married Mr. Paradise of Bristol, a widower, who survived her by many years. The only child of this marriage, now a girl of fifteen, had lived for some years after her mother's death with her Swiss relatives, and was finishing her education in Lausanne at the time of Mr. Paradise's death. His will was in some ways rather odd. The whole of his fortune was left to the children of his first marriage, with the proviso that a small annuity was to be equally divided between his sister-in-law, Kathleen Quibell, and his daughter, Mary Paradise, so long as the said Mary Paradise on leaving school came to reside under the same roof as her aunt, or married with her aunt's approbation. Her failure to comply with these conditions was to result in the enjoyment of the whole income by Miss Quibell during her

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lifetime, after which it would revert to the two Paradise brothers, now established in the Canadian branch of their father's business.

The will was most explicit : three months in every year might be spent by his young beneficiary apart from her aunt and guardian provided that these periods of absence were approved as holidays or as necessary changes of air. Other guardians were named in the event of the elder lady's decease before that of her niece, and while she was still unmarried.

"He seems to have overlooked *nothing*," said Miss Martin, when discussing the terms of this bequest with the Rector, to whom she had gone for counsel in the matter. "It almost looks as if he had disliked the girl."

And then, before Mr. Malory had time to reply to this suggestion, she went off at a tangent in the way he found so disconcerting.

"So it *really* is a good thing that there are *three* bedrooms on this side of the house, and that we shall be able to afford your rent, and besides, Mr. Paradise has made it a condition that little Mary shall *do* something for her living as well."

"How does Miss Quibell feel about undertaking this responsibility?" asked the Rector, realising that the asking of his advice was purely a matter of form.

"Well, now you *ask* me," the little lady admitted. "I don't think she has discussed her *feelings*. She says the young girl herself was very gentle and charming as a child. I *myself* felt a little hesitation. But when I realised that Miss Quibell would make a home for her niece *somewhere*, whatever I decided, I gave way. Little Mary will stay at the school abroad for another year or so. It will be some time before *she* joins us here. We shall have ample time to accustom ourselves to the idea of having her as an inmate of our home."

Miss Martin was clearly making the best of what she felt to be a serious disadvantage attached to the admittedly

enormous boon of Miss Quibell's companionship and, as clearly, was not going to allow the Rector to say so.

He took his departure, after giving the proposal a vague but official blessing. As he walked back to the Dower House, so much too large and so very empty of comfort to him now, he reflected on what he had heard, and once again marvelled to himself that a woman so provokingly feminine as Christina Martin should, at the same time, be so almost flagrantly unmaternal.

4

One sunny morning towards the end of March, Lena Quibell, wearing a holland overall and oversleeves, her hands protected by an old pair of riding-gloves, was, with the help of Matilda, putting books back into the last shelves of the library she had undertaken to reorganise and manage for her friend.

Miss Martin from her seat on the other side of the room gave advice and information while she stitched gold thread over the padding of a Maltese cross on the end of a strip of purple ribbed silk which she was about to finish with a heavy fringe of bullion.

"Christie—I've collected ninety-seven volumes of Mrs. Sherwood's tales. Does anybody ever ask for them now?"

"Only for *Caroline Mordaunt*. But you must keep the *Fairchild Family*, with *Sandford and Merton* and *Ministering Children*, on the Sunday Reading for the Young shelf."

"Yes, I've just put the *King of the Golden River* there," said Miss Quibell, signing to Matilda to carry the two trays, full of Mrs. Sherwood's works in duodecimo volumes, away to the shelves in the passage where books out of demand were stored.

"No, Lena. No. Nothing in the nature of a *fairy-book* must go on that shelf. All the Sunday Reading for the Young books are covered in brown. *Line upon Line* and

Peep of Day and *Palestine for the Young*. Have you got them ? ”

“ Yes, Christie, but I’m not putting *Peep of Day* back at all.”

“ Is it too shabby ? All the pictures fell out soon after it came back from the Lobbinses. Very *careless* people.”

“ It’s not that. It’s the poems. Have you ever read them ? ”

“ Of course. What is wrong with them ? ”

Miss Quibell sat on the broad top of the little step-ladder, her skirts falling round it so that she looked like one of the tall pin-cushions made out of a china doll, with a full, solid crinoline stuffed with bran, that stood on the dressing-table of most well-found nurseries. She turned over the pages of the square, thin book in her hand.

“ Listen to this,” she said, reading aloud with deliberate ferocity :

“ *Satan is glad
When I am bad,
And hopes that I
With him shall lie
In endless chains
And misery.* ”

What doggerel ! What horrid doggerel ! And what a horrid doctrine too.”

“ It is not for *us*,” said Miss Christina, “ to take exception to established doctrine, though I *must* say I cannot believe that the author had any means of *knowing* how the Devil feels. And in my experience young children seldom care for poetry. They wouldn’t trouble to read it.”

“ Poetry, perhaps. But I’ve known more than one young Turk who would read and learn this kind of jingle, and go about singing it too. There’s another, even worse, about the massacre of the innocents :

*From babies dear their blood is streaming ;
Around behold the mothers screaming.*

"Most undignified," said Miss Martin.

Although it was not quite clear whether this referred to the conduct of the mothers or the couplet of the author, Miss Quibell took the condemnation for an assent to her own proposal that the book itself should be secluded.

"I shall put *The World in which I Live* with the Sunday books too," she went on, changing the subject as she slipped down from her perch. "There's no reason why children should not read it on Sunday afternoons."

"It has a *strong* bias towards Protestantism."

Miss Martin's comment was not exactly an objection. She was, after all, a Protestant herself. But Miss Quibell knew what lay behind the criticism.

The practice of her own art of Church embroidery combined with her brother's influence on her daily outlook had given Miss Martin an inclination towards ecclesiastical ritual in all its outward manifestations, and this tendency had been strengthened by a circumstance in her life that had taken place many years before Miss Quibell's arrival in England, and at a time when Miss Martin herself was still young enough to be open to strong and lasting impressions.

Soon after Miss Martin had established herself in the rooms above the stationer's shop in Market Square an event occurred which, though technically ignored by the traditional reserves of Queen's Beaton, actually disturbed its inhabitants to a considerable extent.

The Castle, closed since the death of Lord Malquoits ten years previously, was put in habitable order again to receive his daughter and heiress Loelia, named after her great-grandmother Loelia de Salis, with whom the Spanish chestnut-trees had come to Malquoits. The lady was now become the widow of Lord Gervaise Towyn, second son of the late Marquess of Arenig and brother to the present

Duke of Merioneth. The lady had one son, a child of three, who, unless his uncle married and had children, would one day succeed to the dukedom. But the Duke was still a relatively young man, and his dislike of his Popish sister-in-law was so strong and so well known that it seemed improbable her son would retain his chances of the succession for any length of time.

Loelia Malquoits carried her religion with her when she married young Gervaise Towyn, who had fallen deeply in love with the dark and vehement only daughter of the Roman Catholic family. The sturdy Whiggery of the Merstham-Towyns made it impossible for the child of the marriage to be brought up in his mother's faith. During her marriage she fell away a little from her observance of the religion she never abjured: and, on her return to Malquoits as a widow, the private chapel, where no service had been held since the day she left it as a girl, was restored to use. A rigid personal economy being imposed on any owner of the huge medieval fabric of the Castle, she had been glad to avail herself so far as possible of local talent in the business of repairing and restoring the chapel and its sacerdotal equipment. Enquiry in the town supplied her with the name of an accomplished needlewoman: an interview satisfied the lady that Miss Martin was, for a Protestant, surprisingly well versed in Christian symbolism.

Thus it fell out that the young embroidress from Queen's Beaton had made her way out of the town and had vanished through the Castle gateway at the top of the hill every day for six weeks that spring, to spend long hours in consultation with Lady Gervaise and her chaplain, and to return at sunset bringing with her such part of her work as she was not obliged to execute within the Castle itself.

The incident had been closed for almost twenty years. Miss Martin had never again been summoned to work for Rome. The slight aura of disapproval which had surrounded her in Queen's Beaton during the period of what some people considered almost an apostasy had soon dispelled

itself. But Miss Martin never forgot that she had crossed the county boundary that ran through the Castle courtyard. She was, thus, alone among the townsfolk of Queen's Beaton, in a position to bow to Lady Gervaise Townly on the infrequent occasions when the Castle gates were set open and the Castle barouche drove down the steep High Street, taking its owner out by way of the valley road to call at Beaton Clarence House on Lady Miriam Horsley, her cousin by marriage. The small, dark woman, sitting upright and alert like an angry hawk in the vast carriage that swung high above the roadway on its painted springs, may never have reflected that Miss Martin's elaborate compromise between a curtsy and a bow was the only salute she received after leaving the Castle until the country people on the road beyond the town began touching their forelocks to her, as they did impartially to all the carriage folk and gentry. But from the fact that Lady Gervaise acknowledged her greeting with a quick, bird-like nod Miss Martin derived not only encouragement, but a great sense of benevolent satisfaction. Miss Martin did not go out of her way to bow to Lady Gervaise from any but the kindest, the most truly philanthropic motives. It was, she felt, really sad that anyone on the very threshold of her home should be so completely among strangers as the lonely and bitter châtelaine of Malquoits was when she passed through the street of the little town that climbed the hill to her gates. The Rector, being the representative of the Established Church, though he met and exchanged greetings with Father Géricault, the French chaplain, preserved the most rigid decorum in the matter of avoiding any occasion of making himself known to Lady Gervaise herself. It was undesirable for the incumbent of the parish in the next county to hold communication with the Castle : Queen's Beaton was at once too near and yet too far for any such social bridging of the moral gulf that divided them. There had always been this tradition of separateness. Malquoits was self-contained and self-supporting. The tenants of the estate supplied the Castle

with its domestic and outdoor staff, and they betook themselves in their hours of relaxation to the public-houses and other amusements of the villages and market towns of their own county. Even the letters and telegrams to the Castle came up five miles across the park from the post-office at the railway junction, and not from Queen's Beaton, just outside its gates. In the old lord's time things had been less marked. He had, when in residence, availed himself of his traditional right to occupy, on Christmas and Easter Days, the Malquoits pew in the south transept of Queen's Beaton parish church. The pew itself actually lay within the Malquoits territory, the boundary-line looping round it from the Castle yard, and was still considered by the family to be part of the Roman church. But that was long before Mr. Malory's time. In his days the Malquoits pew had remained closed and untenanted, like an empty tomb. Its carved screen and canopy, objects of high antiquarian worth, shut out what little light came in through the Reynolds windows, copied from those at New College and placed there behind the pew in memory of a son of the Bartrams who had died while still an undergraduate at Oxford.

It had been conjectured that Lady Gervaise's son, little James Towyn, would be sent to church in Queen's Beaton on the two festivals. But for years after his arrival at Malquoits this did not occur. The failure to observe the custom strengthened the townsfolk in their aloofness from everything to do with the Castle.

The boy's religious education was carried on, it seemed, with no reference to his seigneurial right to occupy his portion of the parish church that lay within his mother's domain. The Castle would never belong to him. While she lived it was the property of the late lord's daughter; when she died it would pass to some collateral Malquoit, a foreigner Queen's Beaton had never set eyes on. James Towyn was not his mother's heir. He was of even less importance to the town than she was.

However, when the boy was somewhere between ten

and eleven years old, the Rector was informed that the Malquoits pew would receive an occupant at morning service on Easter Day, and a crowded congregation took collective pains to seem unaware of a tall, dark young man, evidently the boy's tutor, and a slight, pale, fair-haired child, kneeling or standing behind the stone lattice that screened the Castle pew from the nave.

After that, once or twice in the year, young James Towyn would cross the churchyard from the small postern in the Castle wall, and, entering by the private door beneath the windows, usually accompanied by his tutor or by some visiting friend or relative, would be seen by the rest of the congregation. Afterwards, at the dinner-tables in the town, the masters of the house carving the Sunday roast beef would observe how much it was to be hoped that young Mr. James was not being converted to Rome, and the subject would drop for another six months or more as the absences involved by the process of the young man's growth and education took him away from Malquoits for longer and longer periods of time. It is not possible to go on talking about an established state of things. Malquoits had been established when Queen's Beaton had been no more than a huddle of shanties round the old monastery that Henry VIII had destroyed, though he had left its church, pretty much as it stood to-day, to become the nucleus of the town that had risen to its present importance under the reign of Good Queen Anne. Queen's Beaton had its own Squire; the Beatons had their own gentry—good, solid Protestant gentry, supporters of the Establishment and of the Hanoverian dynasty. Malquoits, with its stain of Popery, its tradition of rebellious loyalties, was best left to itself, even in conversation. It was known that the King's health was drunk over water at Malquoits, and that a lame gentleman who called himself the King of France had been seen walking the terraces of the Castle in the company of the old Count and that Marquis now so happily removed from Queen's Beaton Place.

But these reported things, so thrilling to little Miss Martin when she was a newcomer to the town, had passed through familiarity to contempt in the general mind.

Christina Martin, stitching away at her embroidery-frame in the window of her room overlooking the square, had time and detachment to meditate on a situation of which she took her own decided and peculiar view. Her work and training had accented in her a natural disposition to visualise rather than to reason. As her needle plunged downwards into the taut fabric she embroidered, or emerged gleaming from the tracery on the surface as she couched and applied her designs, her mind's eye would be filled with the glow of dark glass in the windows of the little twelfth-century chapel, so secure behind the towers of Malquoits that no covenanting soldier had ever penetrated to break a section of their jewelled splendour. The bloom of Italian velvet, the crimson and amethyst of the altar furnishings she had handled, the medallions of the Malquoits arms embroidered with the insignia and life of Saint Edward the Confessor, all moved before her, and drew together and made a rich and rather confused background for the figure of Lady Gervaise herself. Their antiquity seemed to justify, their sacredness to condone, in that lady's bearing what in another might have been arrogant and unmerciful. Being herself without vanity or self-consciousness, Christina Martin saw in Lady Gervaise nothing that did not elicit her admiration or her sympathy. Miss Martin's own knowledge of all that pertained to the things she was called upon to handle was extensive and sufficient to enable her to advise with authority and to suggest with wisdom. She respected the lady's rank ; the lady respected her competence ; they met on common ground, and each was satisfied with the other's part in that brief intercourse. When her work was done, Miss Martin returned to the simplicity of her own daily routine, her mind enriched by the contact with a world so remote from her own that, in retrospect, her experience of it took on the quality of a dream.

But, through that dream, a sense of pity grew and became the most constant accompaniment of its recurrence. To Miss Martin, Lady Gervaise Towyn, when she appeared in the visible reality of her progress from the Castle gates down the steep hill of the High Street and across Market Square, was a friend who stood in need of a friend's demonstrations of recognition and support.

Miss Martin was at once too kind and too sensible to believe, as the unthinking multitude was taught to believe in her time, that, being a Papist, this lady whom she pitied was in danger of hell fire. But she recognised the grounds of the townspeople's intolerance without in any way identifying herself with their manner of showing it. She showed a very different spirit.

At first, being a comparative stranger in Queen's Beaton, she did not mind being singular in her behaviour in this, as in other particulars of which she was less aware. Everybody else might look the other way, or vanish round convenient corners, or turn to study the display of goods behind the low-fronted, small-paned shop windows of the square when the Castle 'barouche drove by: but Miss Christina stood her ground, and curtsied on it with a brisk and rather bird-like cheerfulness. And the lady in the carriage, bird-like in her way too, but differently, bowed back to her and was gone, leaving something for the on-lookers to talk about over their tea-cups later.

Miss Martin was always out and about when Lady Gervaise drove through the town. She made a point of it. The opening of the double doors in the Castle wall at the top of the High Street was her signal to leave her embroidery frame, tie on her bonnet (though not always to get it quite straight), slip her mantle over her shoulders, and, wet or fine, to take the air in time to turn some corner facing the direction from which the carriage was approaching. Experience taught her that she must allow herself ten good minutes from the time the doors opened to the moment when Lady Gervaise would drive out across Castle Gate.

Sometimes she would look up from an intricate pattern to find she had missed the moment of opening. On these occasions she was apt to become flustered. They were not so frequent that she ever became sufficiently inured to them to meet them with complete calm. During a fine summer the carriage might drive out as often as once a fortnight : when the days drew in it came less often, never when there was snow or ice on the cobblestones of the sloping street. But, even in winter, on a mild afternoon, it *might* come and it was only in wet and stormy weather or during a long frost that her attention was allowed to relax.

The removal from her window overlooking the square to the greater comfort and dignity of the Chantry House would never have taken place if she had not on one occasion been actually inside the house taking tea with Mrs. Malory and so had heard the noise of drawn bolts and falling chains which announced that the gate was being opened. Mrs. Malory had quite understood the rather hurried departure of her caller. She had indeed aided and encouraged it, being, like all Queen's Beaton, fully aware of the curate's sister's inviolable custom, and having no desire to thwart the kindly if absurd impulse.

From her bedroom in her new home Miss Martin could see, and from her seat by the glass porch in the hall she could hear, the preparations for the sortie. But the greater propinquity gave her less time for her own preparations. So she contrived, by keeping a bonnet and shawl at hand, to be outside her own wicket before the carriage had passed it and in warm weather would sometimes sit out in the garden, fully dressed for walking, so as to be ready for the event.

The idea of appearing bare-headed inside her garden fence for her salute never occurred to her. Such an appearance would, in her opinion, savour of disrespect, not only to Lady Gervaise, but to her own position. She was no cottager, to bob and smile behind a hedge at her ladyship. She was Miss Martin, the curate's sister, performing a

rather solemn act of politeness to a lady with whom she had the honour to be acquainted.

As time went on without the exchange of any other communication between the two so widely separated individualities, the image of Lady Gervaise in Miss Martin's mind underwent a process of semi-canonisation. All her own thoughts were kind, and so the person towards whom so many of them were directed took on a kindliness nothing in their actual intercourse had betrayed. Because Lady Gervaise was lonely, she must be gentle. Because the prejudice and traditions of Queen's Beaton ignored her, she became a martyr. Miss Christina began to love the image on which she hung all the lovable virtues. In some unacknowledged dream of her heart she could even imagine her love recognised and returned. Miss Martin, in short, who had never fallen in love, who had never desired the love of man, who could not imagine herself ever leading any life but that of a maiden lady, had constructed romance for herself out of the circumstances that for everybody else implied, at most, a political significance coupled with an accident of parochial and county boundaries.

It spoke well, not only for the kindliness and good sense of Queen's Beaton society, but also for Miss Martin's dignity and strength of character, that this peculiarity of hers, though well known, was never made the subject of remonstrance or of raillery. On the few occasions when some newcomer or some reminiscent old inhabitant had occasion to mention the Castle or its mistress in her presence, Miss Martin's part in the conversation always took the same form.

"Lady Gervaise Towyn's position among us," she would observe with her customary emphasis, "is *delicate*. It is a *delicate* situation." And she would then change the subject with a finality that left her interlocutors no choice.

All this was known to Miss Quibell before she came to live at Little Chantry House : but it was not until she was

established in her new home that she realised how deep the habit went. She was also secretly amused and a little annoyed to discover that Miss Martin expected her to adopt it as her own. The first time the occasion presented itself set a precedent. The two ladies were returning from a morning's walk, and came up the hill together as the Castle carriage drove down. Miss Martin broke off her animated discourse when she saw that the gates were open, and, by the time the carriage drew alongside them, was prepared for action. Her side-stepping and emphatic movement partook of the nature of a bow from the waist upwards and of a modified curtsy in the region of the left knee. Though composed entirely for the purpose of expressing Miss Martin's friendship and sympathy for the lady, it might well have been conceived with the sole purpose of catching that lady's attention. Whether the far less elaborate bow of Miss Martin's companion were included in the gesture of acknowledgment from the carriage it is impossible to say ; but Miss Martin, as they reached their own front door, observed in an unusually dreamy tone :

" I am so glad we did not miss Lady Gervaise this afternoon. She was, I could see, pleased to see us *both*."

Lena forbore to make any comment on this assumption at the time. Later on she did her best to be out of the way or inextricably engaged whenever a repetition of the incident seemed about to occur.

If they happened to be out together when Lady Gervaise drove by, she was perfectly ready to identify herself with her friend's salutation, but she felt that, from the outset, she must resist Miss Martin's implied demand that she, too, should be ready to sally forth at any moment in order to take part in the ceremony. If she were not careful, she thought to herself, smiling a little over Miss Martin's foible, the day might come when she would be sent out alone to waylay and to salute the Malquoits barouche in her dear little Christie's stead.

So whenever, in the course of the arguments and discussions that arose over the reorganisation of the library, Miss Martin betrayed a tenderness for Popery quite out of keeping with her firmly evangelical practice, Lena Quibell knew that allowance was being made for one Papist in particular. And she was never astonished if, a few hours later, by way of restoring the moral balance, an actively Protestant work were placed among the green covers, green being the colour that denoted complete freedom to circulate among all classes of readers. The works of Miss Emma Jane Worboise, of Miss Harriet Martineau, of Miss Frances Power Cobbe, were all covered in green and stood below the novels of Miss Austen, Miss Edgeworth, and Miss Ferrier on those shelves of the library where subscribers were allowed to go and browse for themselves. Miss Martin had always an immediate impulse in favour of the work of a woman writer. The revelation of Currer Bell's true sex had taken Miss Brontë's novels out of yellow into blue covers, where they were accessible on demand.

Miss Quibell put *The World in which I Live* with the other Sunday reading volumes and, slipping off her perch, took *Peep of Day* out into the darkness of the passage. When she returned, the clatter of horses' hoofs on the pavement outside the window attracted her attention to the figure of a groom holding the head of a horse from which it was evident someone, invisible from where she stood, must be dismounting.

"That looks very like Parker," she said, recognising one of Colonel Seymour's grooms. "Someone must have ridden over from the Abbey. I thought they were all still in London."

As she spoke, the green baize swing door that kept the draught from the street entrance from sweeping the flagstones of the hall was pushed aside, and Madeleine Seymour, the skirts of her riding-habit held up in one gloved hand, came in.

Even as she welcomed her, Lena Quibell had time to see that, in spite of the glow the morning ride had put into her young face, all was not well with the girl.

"Let me look at you," she said, as soon as Madeleine had shaken hands with Miss Martin. "You are changed, of course. That long curl on one shoulder, is it the fashion now?"

"Yes, Lena dear, and crinolines are so large we can't all three get into Aunt Amelia's carriage in the evenings. But I don't want to talk about fashions the very first moment I get back to you. You look so happy, dearest Lena, and so well. Oh! lucky, lucky Miss Martin!"

Miss Quibell exchanged a glance with her friend, and Miss Martin nodded, understanding.

"Take Miss Seymour into the parlour, Kathleen," she said. "I can attend to anyone who comes in for a book before dinner-time."

The parlour, one of the three rooms overlooking the garden, with the tops of the more important tombs in the churchyard visible above the espaliered roses on the garden wall, was full of the moving shadows made by the March sunlight behind the branches of the great chestnut-tree. They flickered over the polished rosewood of the furniture and showed up every stitch in the crewel work that covered the low, straight-backed occasional chairs, and the round footstools on the carpet. They danced on the gilded clasps and hinges of the photograph album that lay on the round table side by side with a large, long-handled magnifying-glass and a lacquered photograph holder, rather like a giant's toast-rack, in which various sets of views taken in Italy and the Holy Land were kept ready for the entertainment of anyone who might be left in the room alone. They moved across the fluted rose-coloured silk that filled the front of the cottage piano, and set high lights in the glass shades that protected the French clock and a basket of wool-work fruit, the never-repeated masterpiece of Miss Martin's adolescence. The coloured plate of Turner's "Golden

Bough" and a beautiful engraving of Madox Brown's "Channel Crossing" were the only pictures on the walls; but that was because there was no room for any others if due effect were to be obtained for the display of two very fine samplers executed by old Mrs. Martin in the year 1815, when Thomas and Christina were still in their infancy, that hung on either side of a large and very beautiful trophy of South Sea island shells brought home from a voyage by their uncle—a naval officer who had been killed at Corunna.

It had been the rarest of all treats for Madeleine and Genevieve Seymour to sit in the parlour after dining-room tea at Little Chantry House and to look through the magnifying-glass at all the photographs. Sometimes they asked to be allowed to peer down into the case of shells, and it would be unhooked from the wall and put on a small table for their benefit while their governess sat on in the dining-room, or went into Mr. Martin's study, or walked up and down the narrow garden talking with her friend.

But to-day, as she entered the once enchanted place, Madeleine Seymour betrayed no pleasure. Hardly did she seem conscious of her surroundings at all. As the door closed behind her and her ex-governess, the girl pulled off the wide-brimmed hat with its feathers that had curled so becomingly against her cheek and, throwing it on the table, sank on the floor beside the chair by the window in which Miss Quibell had taken her place.

"My dear," said Lena, noting that there were tears in the girl's dark eyes and that her lips were quivering. "What is the matter? Why have you come back from Town so much sooner than you intended? Where is Genevieve?"

Madeleine shook the heavy and fashionable curl away from her shoulder and slipped her hand into Lena's before she answered.

"Genevieve is going abroad," she said at last. "She has not been well; she is in low spirits."

"But what about Evangeline Malory's wedding next
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month? Will she be back in time to be bridesmaid with you? "

"She will not be able to appear at the wedding," said Madeleine solemnly. "Evangeline will have to find someone else, or be content with me, and the Taylors and Sophia Western."

"Evangeline will be sorry, though five bridesmaids ought to satisfy her. Is Gennie seriously ill?"

"She is ill, yes, though not too ill to travel. But the very thought of being present at a wedding is unbearable to her."

Lena began to see light on the crisis.

"I will get some sewing," she said, realising that the interview would be long, "and you shall tell me all about it."

When she came back with her work-bag, she found Madeleine sipping a glass of sherry and nibbling a biscuit.

"Is not Miss Martin kind and thoughtful?" Madeleine sighed, with a suggestion of Lady Dale's rather patronising insincerity. "She noticed that I was distressed and has insisted on bringing me this refreshment. I don't wonder you love her."

"Everyone who knows her loves her," said Miss Quibell, taking out a gold thimble set with little turquoises and seed pearls, and threading her needle without looking at Madeleine's still agitated face. "Now, sit in that comfortable chair and tell me whatever you want me to know."

The tale was a long one, and Madeleine, confused by indignation and maidenly reticences, told it in a zigzag way. As she hesitated and explained, Lena was again distressed to notice how quickly the girl had succumbed to the influence of her aunt's peculiar form of worldliness. Even her speech was affected, with turns of phrase or slipshod elisions that were repugnant to Lena's ear.

Madeleine began with the end, or even after the end of the business. She and Genevieve had not been presented, having left London already, possibly for good. They could

never, *never* stay with Aunt Amelia again ; their father would never allow it. Aunt Amelia's indelicacy, her rashness—Madeleine could not find words strong enough to convey what these faults had been.

Gradually from the recital of Aunt Amelia's iniquity a figure began to emerge. He—for the figure was indubitably masculine, even before it appeared—was young, fair, tall, and oh, so enchantingly handsome. Even before they knew who he was, the twins riding in the Row on fine mornings had noticed and admired his air. Rather like Lord Byron, but fairer, with blue eyes ; he was melancholy ; he often rode alone. And, of course, he had not stared or behaved in any impertinent manner, but they couldn't help noticing that he had noticed them.

"From the first, dearest Lena, we both knew that it was Genevieve. It might have been me if the rule of contrasts means anything, because I am dark and he was fair. But though Genevieve's hair is almost the same colour as his was, and her eyes also, though hers are darker, it was to Genevieve that he seemed to be drawn. She used to blush—such a lovely colour, Lena ; you know she always blushed more than I did—when he rode past us. It was quite natural that he should have noticed her more. And he was so serious and so pale, and his hair was just a little—not too curly."

Madeleine paused to sigh, and Lena began to wonder if this constant reference to the hero of the tale in the past tense indicated that his life had been cut short while Genevieve's romance was still in bud.

"Yes, Madeleine," she said.

"Well, one night Aunt Amelia took us to a party, and he was there. And he was presented to Aunt Amelia and then to us, and he danced with us both, but twice with Genevieve. She has learned to valse so gracefully, Lena. He said it was like dancing with a soap-bubble to dance with her. And he begged my aunt's permission to call, and of course she gave it. And even *then* we didn't realise who he was."

"But your aunt must have known."

"Not at first. You see, she called him 'Mr. Town,' and we never thought of such a thing. And he called before Aunt Amelia had made her enquiries. The very next day, Lena. And then my aunt found out, so she asked him to dine."

"What did she find out, Madeleine?"

"Why, that he was Mr. James Towyn all the time. We were so astonished. It seemed so very odd to have to go to London to meet someone who had lived most of his life only five miles away from the Abbey. He sat between us at dinner. It was only a small dinner, as we weren't properly out yet, but he talked most to Gennie. He'd taken her down. He talked a little to me, too, and then we all three talked together, and after dinner up in the drawing-room. He knew much more about the Beatons than we knew about Malquoits. He said we must both come to Malquoits in the summer, when we were all back in the country again. I knew then that it would be difficult. But I never thought it would be so dreadful as it has turned out to be."

Madeleine showed signs of being about to burst into tears, and Lena was obliged to give up her rôle of listener and to put leading questions in order to avert the threatened breakdown. Madeleine, as she knew by experience, was only too likely to cry herself speechless and be laid up with a headache for the rest of the day if she were allowed to get well into a crying fit.

The tale was indeed a distressing one. The young man had ridden for two more mornings with the twins, and, on the third day, had announced his intention of paying his after-dinner call on their aunt that very afternoon. Genevieve, who was by this time quite openly and unashamedly in love with her romantic cavalier, had, not without excuse, but, as it proved, most disastrously insisted that they should both change their dresses after luncheon. And, as a girl lacking guidance, and lost in the bewilderment of her first

love-affair will, Genevieve had tried on dress after dress, making Madeleine do the same, and was satisfied with none. So, when the caller was shown into the drawing-room at Belgrave Square, he was met by Aunt Amelia alone, her nieces being still upstairs changing out of their tartan into their new cashmere toilettes, with their disordered curls to be arranged before they could make their appearance.

"And when we did go down, Lena, it was too late. Mr. Towyn was standing in the middle of the drawing-room holding his hat and stick and gloves all together in one hand and bowing to my aunt, but not shaking hands with her. He was very pale. And when he saw us he stood still and bowed again, twice, once to me, and once to Gennie, but there was no distinction in his bow. He did not even look at her. My aunt said: "Mr. Towyn is bidding us good-bye. He is going abroad." We could see that she was very much put out even before he had gone. Gennie said, "Oh, when?" and he said, "At once. You must wish me *bon voyage*." I thought Gennie was going to faint, so I said quickly, "We do. We hope you will enjoy the Continent very much." He looked at me then and said, "Thank you, Miss Seymour." And that was all."

"That was not enough to make Gennie ill, if that really is all," said Miss Quibell.

"I meant that was all Mr. Towyn said. But it was only the beginning of the unhappiness and the dreadful things. Oh, Lena, I can hardly tell you what Aunt Amelia had done."

But Lena was able to conjecture and to help the girl through the difficulties of the next part of her tale. Aunt Amelia, finding herself alone with Mr. Towyn, who was in the gayest spirits and had proposed a theatre party for the very next evening, had suddenly taken it upon herself to ask him his intentions. When they had only known him for a week and three days! He had been very much surprised, and had said he was not seriously thinking of anything but being friendly towards the Misses Seymour, as

they were his neighbours, and that he would have to wait till his mother and the Colonel could meet before he could answer Lady Dale's question. Then, it seems, Aunt Amelia grew angry and said that Mr. Towyn was trifling with Gennie's affections, so Mr. Towyn had said this was terrible, and the only thing he could do would be to leave the country at once. And even then it would not have been too unendurable ; but Lady Dale had gone to the Colonel and had told him, and he had been very angry with them all.

"Papa blamed everybody," said the dejected girl. "Aunt Amelia for letting Mr. Towyn be introduced at all when she knew that nobody in the Beatons has anything to do with the Castle ; and me for not telling him all about it at once ; and poor Gennie for falling in love. As if she could help it ! And of course he blamed Mr. Towyn. But Gennie and I did manage to persuade him that Mr. Towyn had never *said* anything to Gennie, or done anything really. There had not been time for him to begin paying attentions in the way that compromises a young lady. I am sure he was waiting till we were properly out, and that if he had come to care for Gennie, after some time, he would have gone to Papa. So Papa calmed down for a time. Then he noticed that Gennie couldn't sleep and wouldn't eat. She began crying and could not stop, and Dr. Horder said she would go into a decline if something was not done. So Papa went to see Lady Gervaise Towyn. And that was the worst of all, because Papa said Mr. Towyn was a heartless scoundrel and Lady Gervaise said that Gennie was a designing minx, and Papa came away saying that no daughter of his should ever speak to any child of hers again, and she said that her only child had no occasion to seek the company of young women of, I think Papa said, 'the lower classes.' But he was so angry, and Gennie was crying so much, I cannot be quite sure about that."

"Did your father repeat this to Gennie?" asked Lena, really horrified at the way poor little Gennie's affair had been handled.

"We were all in the morning-room when he came back from Carlton House Terrace, and my aunt said, 'Well, Marcus, what is Lady Gervaise's verdict?' So we knew where he had been, and of course there was no getting Gennie out of the room then. And when he began to tell I am sure he meant to keep calm, but Aunt Amelia does annoy him so, and he forgot about Gennie and told us everything."

"Poor little Gennie; was she very much upset?"

"Lena, she had hysterics. I'd no idea what hysterics were like. I kept thinking, 'How shocked Lena would be.' We took her up to bed, and the doctor came and gave her a soothing draught, so that she went to sleep for hours. Papa was very much upset, though I don't think he felt it was so much his fault as Mr. Towyn's and Lady Gervaise's. He has thrown over all his own engagements and taken her to Spa."

"Are you alone at the Abbey?" asked Lena, feeling with dismay that it might be her duty to offer to stay with the girl until life became more normal again. But Madeleine was not alone. Her Aunt Amelia had accompanied her and was at that moment calling at the Rectory to ask Mr. Malory and Evangeline if they could take Madeleine in until the wedding was over. After that, if Genevieve were sufficiently restored, Madeleine would rejoin her in London for their presentation at Court in May.

"I shall like being with Evangeline, even if I do sometimes catch sight of the Castle gates," said Madeleine. "And even if seeing all her bride's preparations reminds me that neither Genevieve nor I will ever marry now."

"Come, Maidie, you are not doomed to spinsterhood because little Gennie has been upset over what, after all, is not a very serious matter. So long as there was no understanding between them, and they had seen so little of one another, they will both get over it. You have told me there had been no sort of promise or declaration on either side.

Gennie can live down her natural mortification in time. Other things will come to her mind and help her forget what, after all, was due to no fault in her."

But Madeleine did not agree. She could not believe that any heart so deeply wounded as her sister's would ever again rejoice.

"Oh, no, Lena," she sighed. "I fear that Gennie will never be happy again. Sometimes I fear her health is really ruined and that she will die of grief."

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Genevieve Seymour did not die of grief. The change of air and scene, the novelty of being alone and comparatively free to amuse herself, encouraged and admired by the Colonel, whose remorse for his own share in his daughter's breakdown quickly transformed itself into pride in her unfolding charms, wrought a cure that was completed in a most natural, though, to Madeleine, a very unexpected and rather shocking way.

One morning, about a week before Evangeline's wedding, Madeleine, who had recovered her own spirits in the life and bustle of the Rectory, came into the library in a state of evident excitement. She found Miss Martin alone in the hall, and so urgent was her news that she might not have waited for Lena's return to tell it had the elder lady seemed at all ready to listen to her. But Miss Martin was in no mood to listen to any young girl's chatter. She sat at her embroidery frame, but, between each stitch she looked up and out across the garden beyond the glass porch as though, thought Madeleine, she expected an angel to fly down and perch on the cypress by the wall.

"You have come to see Lena, my dear," she said. "You had better walk down High Street to meet her. She has gone out to do the shopping this morning. I am expecting her back almost at once. She is already a little late. Will you hasten her return? I may have to go out at any

minute—on an urgent affair—myself.” And she waved her hand towards a chair on which her straw bonnet and Paisley shawl were lying in readiness to be worn.

Madeleine met Lena turning out of Market Square into High Street. They climbed the hill together, walking slowly. So deep was Madeleine’s absorption in the news she had to tell that Miss Martin’s pressing engagement was forgotten altogether. Half-way between Market Square and the Castle gates she was startled to see the little lady hurrying towards them.

“I am going to post a letter,” said Miss Martin breathlessly as she hurried past.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Madeleine. “I quite forgot Miss Martin’s message about hurrying you home.”

Lena Quibell looked up towards the Castle gates. The double doors that filled the archway stood open, showing the sunlit courtyard and the windows of the lower floors of the Castle beyond.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Miss Martin will be in time for her appointment. Tell me, Maidie. Will Genevieve come home now?”

“Yes, almost at once,” sighed the happy girl, and began her rapid narration once more.

And, indeed, her news was excuse enough for the small forgetfulness. Genevieve was going to be married. A long letter had arrived that morning from Spa—a long, happy letter. Papa knew Captain Anstruther. He had served under him in the Crimea. He was young and handsome and very gallant. He was going to India with his regiment in September: that was why they wanted to be married now, so that they could have their honeymoon quietly before the business of getting all her outfit and the furniture they would take to their house at Darjeeling, where he would be stationed. So lovely for Genevieve, up in the hills where she could feel almost at home, or at least as nearly home as Switzerland. She was coming back to London to be married. All Gerald’s family and brother officers and friends were to

be at the wedding. Aunt Amelia, completely if hurriedly forgiven, was having the wedding from Belgrave Square. Madeleine was to be chief bridesmaid, with Captain Anstruther's three sisters. Papa was enchanted. Captain Anstruther had money enough, and with Genevieve's share of their mother's dowry they would be *very* happy. And one day, but not for a long time, because his grandfather was still alive and not yet sixty, Captain Anstruther would be Lord Stonefield. Wasn't it marvellous for Madeleine to be going to be bridesmaid twice in one month !

"You must be careful, Maidie," Lena warned her. "Isn't there a saying that three times a bridesmaid is never a bride ?"

To Miss Quibell's surprise, the girl's face clouded.

"Oh, Lena," she said, "I should not mind a bit. I think I'd rather not. See how happy you and Miss Martin are, and you have never married. And when I think how dreadfully unhappy Gennie was, though she's quite cured now, I feel afraid of ever feeling the same. Being in love is so terrible. And it doesn't seem to last. Gennie was in love—oh, we won't talk about it."

"That wasn't exactly love," said Lena. "If it had been love there would have been something to live and hope for, and the difficulties would have strengthened it."

"I'm glad they didn't," said Madeleine. "I cannot bear struggles and disputes. If ever I did marry, I should like it to be to someone I had known a long time, much older and wiser than I am ; someone I could look up to and respect and obey, with a thin face and hair that was getting a little grey, and a very kind voice."

They had reached the garden wicket, and stood there for a moment as Madeleine said she had not time to go indoors for a more prolonged conversation.

Lena looked at her in some surprise. This was a more definite statement of desire than she had ever heard the girl make before. Madeleine was gazing into space, a little

lost in contemplation of this visionary husband who sounded so unlike the lover of a girl's untutored dream. A quick suspicion crossed her mind, but she was too wise to put it into words.

"What does Evangeline say?" she asked.

"Oh, she's very glad, but she has too much to think of just now to say much about Gennie. I'm going back to her now to help with the invitations. We shall talk about it, of course. But—Lena, I cannot tell you how kind Mr. Malory has been all the time. He could see I was in trouble when I first went to the Rectory, and he asked me to tell him about it. I would never have thought a clergyman would understand a girl's feelings so beautifully. He taught me not to be angry about it, and to submit my will. I did so wish he could have been with poor Gennie, but he said I could pray for her, and I did—and *now*. . . ."

At this point Madeleine's rhapsody was drowned by the clatter of horses' hoofs and the silver jingle of harness that beat and rang importantly from within the Castle gateway. The girl turned her gaze in the direction of the sound.

"Oh, Lena," she exclaimed, "I think I will come into the library for a moment. Lady Gervaise must be at the Castle and be coming out for a drive. I couldn't bear to see her or that she should see me, even though she would not know I was Gennie's sister."

As they took refuge from the oncoming carriage and its occupant, Lena smiled to herself to think with what different feelings the cockades of the men on the box and the glitter of the harness in the morning sunlight would be seen by her dear Christie, now on her way home again from the posting of an imaginary letter in Market Square.

She slipped her arm into Madeleine's.

"I'm glad you are finding so good a friend in Mr. Malory," she said, as they walked up the garden path. "He is still young enough to share your confidence, even though his daughter is going to be married next week."

"He is five years younger than Papa," said Madeleine.
"His birthday is on the 14th of October."

Lena's suspicions were confirmed. She was not sorry, except for the Colonel. It seemed likely that he would find the Abbey a lonely dwelling-place in the near future.

CHAPTER III

MARY PARADISE

I

The winter of 1859 was the coldest in the memory of Jim Blake's mother. She had been one of the children who had drawn a sled all the way from Queen's Beaton to Beaton Mill in the year when the river froze so hard that it was used as a highway. That was in old King George's reign. You couldn't expect any frost in these soft and pampered days to be as black as that one, what with gas lamps in Market Square and the railway no more than ten miles away. Still, though the river did not freeze hard enough for sleds, the gas-pipes in the market-place froze so that the old oil lamps had to be taken out and hung up again. There was skating by mid-December in the valley and in the flats round the lower gates of Malquoits, where the road ran by the river before it entered the Beatons and became deep and narrow and turbulent.

There had been snowfalls early in December ; but it was too cold for snow now. The frost was black. The snow that still lay on field and roadside was frozen into glassy hardness. In spite of scattered ashes and the roughing of horseshoes, it was impossible to get any wheeled traffic up or down the steepest part of High Street between Castle Gate and the Dower House. The only callers at the library for a month were those who lived within walking distance.

Miss Martin, wearing knitted mittens, her feet in an old fur-lined muffeteer that had belonged to her grandmother, sat as near to the dwarf as she could without getting her flounces scorched, and sewed away without ever raising her eyes to the iron-studded doors in the Castle wall. Lady

Gervaise would not drive out for weeks to come. The roads would be even more dangerous than they were now when the frost broke and the thawing snow dissolved into slush and mud. Lena, who walked for an hour every day, took the way that led from Queen Street through the white gates into Malquoits Park because it was flat and unfrequented. She had seen sleighs going up and down the zigzagging drive that branched off from the water-meadows, climbing up to the main entrance of the Castle. But, for all the signs of life Queen's Beaton saw or heard from it, Malquoits might be a castle of the dead.

This intensification of the Castle's normal winter seclusion did not trouble Miss Martin very greatly. She had plenty to think about, and to talk about as well ; plenty of indoor work to occupy her when she was not embroidering ; plenty to do when Lena was out walking or sitting for long hours in the Rectory nurseries with Madeleine Malory and her eighteen-months-old little girl.

It was far too cold for the baby to be taken out of doors, so Lena, her godmother, was forced to go down every day to see her and to hear whatever news the Rector might have received from London and the outside world, from which they were more or less cut off by snowdrifts and the breakdown of the postal and telegraph services. Sometimes Lena would bring back Georgina Malory, now a sturdy child of eight and a half, who took an exhaustive interest in Miss Martin and her needlework. Georgina loved nothing better than to spend an hour at Little Chantry House looking into the lower drawers of the tallboys where Miss Martin kept her spools and skeins of silk and wool, and the dim ghosts in patterned canvas of the footstools and chair-backs that the ladies of Queen's Beaton would, in time to come, bring to life in green and purple and yellow cross-stitch woolwork.

But, since the frost had hardened, Madeleine had not come up to Little Chantry. Once or twice Miss Martin had wondered whether there might not be a very happy reason for this failure of the usually robust young matron to brave

the cold. Perhaps dear little Mrs. Malory was again in an interesting condition. Miss Martin allowed her thoughts to stray so far, but set a guard on her tongue. Not even to Lena would she make so indiscreet a suggestion. They had never discussed the advent of Madeleine's first baby until a fortnight before it was born, and then only with reference to the amusing situation that would arrive when Evangeline, now living in Taunton, had a stepsister or brother who would become aunt or uncle to her own three-months-old little Henry.

It had turned out very well, this marriage between the eighteen-year-old girl and the Rector, still a young man in his forties. Madeleine had always been a serious and home-loving child. Her sister was married and away in India, and the Colonel spent so much of his time at the War Office helping to reorganise the volunteer forces in case those dreadful French and Italians decided to try to invade England, as Boney had tried, and failed to do, that it was a blessing the dear child had been able to make such a happy decision while she was staying in the house of which she was now the mistress.

Everything, Miss Martin told herself, as she sat alone waiting for Lena to come in, everything had turned out so very well. And this coming event, if indeed it were coming, was not only in itself a happy one (was not a babe in the house a well-spring of pleasure?), but it had given rise to an equally happy expectation. For, if Madeleine Seymour had not married the Rector, he might have sent little Georgina away to school when Evangeline married; and, if Madeleine had not become the mother of little Ettie, she might have gone on teaching her stepdaughter herself, and the idea of bringing Mary Paradise to England would have been surrounded by many difficulties. Miss Martin always saw a question in terms of its difficulty. It was said that once in Mrs. Maxton's shop she had lamented that life was extremely complicated, merely because the butcher had no veal cutlets that day. But in the matter of Mary Paradise

there had been real complications, as well as delays. They had talked of her coming for over two years. At first it had been decided to leave the girl at her school in Lausanne for another year. She was perfecting her French and music, and by talking English to her fellow-boarders twice a week at table, was helping to defray the cost of what would otherwise have been too expensive an education. Then she had fallen ill. A chill had developed into congestion of the lungs, and it had been thought unwise to send her to England for the winter after her recovery. In the spring, Mademoiselle Hauteville had written to beg Miss Quibell to leave "*la petite Mary*" with her for a few months longer, as the English mistress had left the Villa Souriante and could not be replaced at once, and Mary was most useful. Besides, she was making such excellent progress with her singing. Singing lessons had been recommended as part of her cure after her illness, and the girl had developed quite a pretty voice. So, what with one thing and another, the time had slipped by and Mary had not taken up her residence under the roof provided for her by her aunt under the terms of her father's will.

Lena's conscience did not trouble her once she had ascertained that she was under no immediate obligation to remove the girl from the school where her father had placed her before his death, particularly as the expenses of Mary's long and troublesome illness and convalescence had more than exhausted Lena's own share of their joint income for over a year.

Now, however, the time had come when Mary's arrival could be delayed no longer. She was over sixteen years of age ; her education was said to be finished ; and a party of her fellow-pupils, returning under escort to England for Christmas, offered an opportunity of company for the journey as far as London. Mr. and Mrs. Malory, who expected to be in Town for their Christmas shopping, had offered to meet her there and to bring her back with them to Queen's Beaton.

Everything seemed to be arranging itself in the best possible way. Even the cold weather and Madeleine's sudden determination not to go to London with her husband had been followed by the most welcome of suggestions. Georgina had become rather a handful for her young stepmother, who, in her anxiety first to win the child's affections and later not to allow the arrival of her own daughter to make any difference in her behaviour towards Georgina, had been over-indulgent, and so spoilt her. The little girl would certainly be happier under rather more discipline. And what, said the Rector, could be happier and more fortunate than this opportunity of having their own Miss Quibell's own niece in the schoolroom at the Rectory? What, indeed, said Miss Martin, who, for once, saw no complication in the proposed arrangement. She would have settled the matter before Mary Paradise herself could be either seen and approved or even consulted: though for that matter Miss Martin did not consider that so young a girl could be supposed to have any choice about accepting arrangements made for her own advantage and everybody else's convenience.

But Lena was not so happy about the plan. She had not seen Mary Paradise since the child was a sturdy little creature of eleven, dark-eyed and rosy-cheeked and still devoted to a large family of unusually elegant dolls. It was difficult to think of her as come to years of discretion and able to take charge of another child's conduct and instruction. And, remembering the course of her own life, Lena felt an inward foreboding, a reluctance to shut so young a girl into the narrow confines of a schoolroom, where she might squander her youth and wear away her bloom even as Lena herself had done. Still, these were sentimental objections. It was not as if they were proposing to send Mary among strangers or condemn her to the ambiguities of a resident governess's position, neither servant nor guest, dependent both on the kindness of her employers and of their servants for her happiness and comfort.

Mary would live with them at Castle Gate, going down to the Rectory for a few hours every morning and having her afternoons free for her own life in the home, where every preparation for her welcome was being made.

The largest of the three bedrooms on the garden side of the house, unoccupied since the death of the curate more than three years ago, was repapered in a little design of rosebuds and blue ribbon bows. The four-post bed was stripped of the worn and sombre red damask hangings that had sheltered Thomas Martin's slumbers and rehung with a glistening chintz to match the wallpaper. Miss Martin devoted an afternoon to re-covering a little round mahogany footstool with a piece left over from the bed hangings. The result was slippery to the foot but very cheering to the eye. A little heart-shaped mirror stood on the dressing-table, with two heavy green cut-glass candlesticks on either side of it and a set of pin-trays and pomatum pots in green china, with views of ruined churches and castles, disposed before it. A writing-table in the corner by the fireplace was furnished with a blotter and pen-rack in papier maché painted with bunches of roses and inlaid with richly tinted slabs of mother-of-pearl. The large, round, shallow sponge-bath, with a lip for convenience in emptying it every morning, stood against the wall behind the marble topped circular-fronted wash-hand-stand, with its white and gold ewer and basin set on a mat of thickly crocheted, unbleached cotton yarn. Lena had repainted the bath, white inside, apple-green outside, to match the apple-green paint of the woodwork. The bare, unpainted oak of the floor was waxed and polished till it shone between the strips of gay Brussels carpet that had once covered the parlour floor, and now, its worn part cut away, spread strange flowers on a neutral-tinted ground by bedside and fireplace. Two rush-bottomed chairs and a rocking-chair with a straight back and a caned seat, together with an open chest, a hanging cupboard, and a large chest of drawers

with moulded glass handles, completed the furniture of the room.

There were no pictures on the rose-besprinkled walls, no books on the set of shelves that hung above the writing-table. "The child will have little things of her own to hang about," said Miss Martin, and she packed away the few engravings and the sermons of Cardinal Newman that had remained in the room after the rest of Thomas Martin's belongings had been dispersed throughout the house.

It had been suggested that Lena should move from her room at the head of the stairs to the larger room. But Miss Martin had pointed out that this would give the child less space to call her own.

"And," said Miss Martin waving her hand, "she would be separating us, coming between us. It is better for her to be *your* neighbour. You *are* her relative ; I am not."

The point seemed a little obscure, but, as Lena was well satisfied with her present room and had already established many of her own belongings in the study belowstairs, there was nothing to argue about, though for a moment she wondered whether the great chestnut-tree, that grew taller and more heavily leaved every year, would allow enough sunlight to reach the room it shadowed more completely than either hers or Christina's. Christina's room, standing at the other end of the house, where the garden widened away from the churchyard wall, was out of the range of its branches, and more or less cut off from the rest of the house.

Also, by giving Mary the largest bedroom they avoided any rearrangement of the parlour and the study. There was room for three people to live very comfortably together belowstairs. The parlour, where Mary would practise singing and the piano, was never used by the two ladies except in the evenings and when they had afternoon callers. Beyond having the piano tuned and putting out half a dozen extra table-napkins from the store-room, no changes were necessary belowstairs, though Lena noticed that the

high-backed arm-chair in which Thomas Martin had always sat at table was removed from the dining-room to the passage that served as an entrance-hall to the private part of the house. It was, she understood, less difficult for her beloved Christina to allow her brother's chair to support the cloaks or parcels of chance callers than to risk its being taken into regular occupation by the little new-comer to their table.

So busy were the two ladies with their preparations that they hardly noticed how much the bitter cold outside the house was affecting the commerce of the library and emporium. Indoors, the dwarf consumed fuel and gave out heat and the rooms and passages of the house were gay and fragrant with the burning of wood fires and the smell of beeswax and turpentine. Miss Christina added a brown woollen jacket trimmed with ancient and cat-like fur to the mittens she wore as an extra protection against the draughts in the passage and staircase. Lena tied a cardinal red shawl over the dusky purple of her winter gown and drew an old, soft pair of white kid gloves over her hands when she went to bed to protect them from roughness and chapping. She also procured a strong, brown, lidless hamper to serve as a log-basket in Mary's room while the winter cold lasted. They spoke of the weather, and quoted other people's experiences of it from letters and the newspapers to such customers and subscribers as did come in during the daylight hours ; but their own business occupied them fully for the rest of their time. It was with surprise and some congratulation that they realised how quickly the fortnight before Christmas had gone, and that Mary was due just as the paint was dry and the last curtain-ring had been sewn on to the valances in her bedroom.

On the twenty-third of December a letter announcing the safe arrival of the Calais-Dover boat and the intended departure from London by an early train on the twenty-fourth arrived from Mr. Malory. Soon after breakfast the temperature rose perceptibly with the slow falling of great

snowflakes, that looked against the light like soft brown feathers from the gigantic plucking of Mother Goose sitting hidden behind the grey banks of the sky. But the cold was too strong for the snow. Though it floated downwards throughout the day, the frost of nightfall checked its fall, and in the morning the ground was only thinly spread with its crisp and sparkling moss.

Lena went over to the Rectory to reassure Madeleine, who had imagined snowdrifts and a train full of frozen and probably dying passengers held up in the wastes of Salisbury Plain. Madeleine was becoming an anxious wife and an indulgent mother.

"We can't keep Ettie from the window," she complained. "Nurse has had to put on her outdoor pelisse to prevent her catching cold, and to tie on her gloves as well. She's never seen snow before."

"Thnow. Ettie. Thnow," observed a satisfied voice from behind the folds of the window curtain, where Ettie was standing half hidden and engaged in the enthralling occupation of clouding a window-pane with her infant breath and wiping it clear with a fist clenched inside a fingerless white woollen glove tied at the wrist with what was by this time a very dragged bow.

"Come here, Ettie, and speak to your god-mamma," commanded Madeleine.

But at eighteen months it is easy to disregard the commands of an inexperienced and admiring parent, and the only reply to this adjuration was the sound of vigorous blowing, followed by a soft thumping on the glass, and the measured ejaculation of Ettie's best word.

"Per-ritty," said Ettie, in three delighted syllables.

Madeleine, spurred by the amusement in Lena's eyes, rose from her chair by the fire and, crossing the room, picked up her recalcitrant daughter and carried her back to the hearthrug.

Ettie was a good-tempered child. She kicked a little, but she did not scream, and, once on the hearthrug, she lifted

a mouth, still moist from blowing, for Lena to kiss, and placed one damp gloved hand in hers. Lena kissed the baby's cheek very lightly, and untied the ribbon from the wrist of the hand she held.

"Come, Ettie, and have your coat taken off," cooed the anxious mother. "It's too hot for little girls to wear their coats by this great fire."

Ettie submitted to the removal of her coat and gloves, and watched with every sign of approval as Lena folded them neatly and laid them on a low chair. For a moment she accepted the distraction of a clipped wool ball Lena had made for her. Having tasted and found this object unpalatable, she attempted to bury it in the long white fur of the bearskin hearthrug, and was so busy over this that Madeleine resumed her talk of dearest Richard and that poor little Mary, and of the cold and hunger they were certainly enduring on the journey.

"But, Madeleine, they'll have sandwiches with them, and I'm sure Mr. Malory has his flask well filled."

"Do you suppose that Mary will be able to drink brandy?" asked Madeleine—rather foolishly, Lena thought.

"If the Rector tells her to do so, I daresay she'll be very grateful for a sip, unless they are able to get hot coffee at the junction," she said.

"Oh, I do hope they can. I did hear that someone had started a coffee-stall for travellers in this bitter weather. Do you suppose the train will be late? When shall I see Mary? In church to-morrow? Will she go to church? I shall be too excited at having Richard back to-night to think of anything else, but I long to see Mary Paradise. I've heard so much about her ever since she was quite a little girl. Have you still got that photograph of her with her little rocking-horse, Lena? When do you suppose she'll be rested from her journey and begin Georgie's lessons?"

"Ask me one question at a time," said Lena, "or tell me if you want me to answer any one in particular."

But Madeleine was too full of questions and anticipations to need any particular reply.

"Lena," she burst out, "what do you think I heard this morning? Mr. James Towyn will be home for Christmas. Do you think he'll come to church? I shall see him if he does. I get a full view of the Malquoits pew. It's always been empty since I married."

Lena was only mildly interested by the news.

"What has become of Ettie?" she asked.

"She's gone back to the window without her coat and gloves," exclaimed Ettie's mother, forgetting all her other preoccupations as she retrieved her indignant child and rang for the nurse to remove her from the morning-room.

The snow had stopped falling when Lena left the Rectory to walk carefully up the ice-covered side-walk of High Street on her way to the house where she was, in a few hours, time, to welcome the girl over whose life she had been given so strange and so unwanted a control. Now that it was near, she began to feel anxious about the meeting with Mary Paradise. She had long ago forgiven her sister for the part she had played in that disaster to her own young hopes which had remained a shadowy link and barrier between them, never spoken of, never quite forgotten. Death had not quite obliterated the memory of that shadow. In her heart Lena knew that Mary Paradise would not have been allowed to remain abroad so long if it had not been for the intangible fetters that held her own welcome back, still keeping the movement of her affections heavy, an impediment to the love that should have made the performance of a duty spontaneous and free. Now that the girl was within a few miles of the home she might possibly make her own for life, Lena was conscious that even the rising excitement of Christina Martin was powerless to raise her own expectation to any pitch of joy. Since daybreak Miss Martin had been tripping to and fro and up and down in the house in preparation for the return, "at any minute, Lena," of the

Malorys' carriage from the junction, whither it had been sent overnight in readiness to meet the London train.

"*Everything*," said Miss Martin, giving herself the little bow that emphasised her emphatic speech, "everything throughout the house must be in perfect order. We want our dear little friend to begin as we expect her to go on."

So, lest Mary Paradise should misunderstand the nature of the life she would be expected to lead behind the library and emporium, Miss Martin had every curtain taken down and every carpet taken up and every picture removed from the walls and the spaces behind them thoroughly dusted. "For all the world," as Matilda pointed out, "as if we was spring cleaning. And before Christmas, too!"

The snow fell more thickly as the afternoon darkened. By three o'clock all the people going in and out of the lamp-lit shops in Market Square, buying the last oranges and iced cakes and coloured candles and almonds and raisins and sprigs of holly that would be needed for dressing the dinner-tables next day, told the shopkeepers and one another that they would be having a white Christmas this year. Many of them added that the Rector and the foreign young lady coming to live with Miss Martin and Miss Quibell must be having a cold drive of it from the junction. Little that happened anywhere within the township was unknown to the dwellers in its smaller houses and side-streets. Many people whom Lena Quibell did not yet know by sight knew her by name, and could tell you exactly how many bonnets she had worn to church during the two years she had been living with Miss Martin. The expected arrival, in mid-winter, of a complete stranger was not so common an event that any detail of the smallest change it would occasion was too insignificant to escape the attention accorded to a piece of real news. More than one housewife, whom the cold night might have driven indoors at sunset that Christmas Eve, prolonged her shopping and stopped to gossip with a friend, lingering on the chance of seeing the Rectory carriage drive through at the west side

of the Market Square, where the Malquoits road entered it a couple of hundred yards from the park gate.

It had been arranged that, as the horses would be tired and the final rise of the hill would be glassy with frozen snow and too steep and slippery for them to negotiate, Lena should go down to the Rectory after tea to receive her niece, and take her the rest of the way on foot.

"A brisk walk will be good for her after two hours in the carriage *and* a day in the railway train," said Miss Martin, seeing Lena off just before six. "I will have a glass of negus ready for her the moment she gets in, *and* see that the fire in her bedroom is burning *brightly*. I daresay the footman from the Rectory will bring up her box. Matilda has put a hot brick in her bed already."

It was eight o'clock, and Lena had been with Madeleine for almost two hours before the sound of horses' hoofs and the jingling of harness announced the arrival of the travellers. Muffled in her crimson shawl, Lena followed Madeleine across the inner hall to the cold marble floor of the entrance-lobby, where a servant was already throwing open the double doors to let the yellow gaslight from the hanging chandelier send its beam of welcome across the drive. The beating hoofs drew nearer ; the frozen sand and snow of the circular drive crunched under the turning wheels ; the carriage lamps lit up the laurestinus bushes that screened the front of the house from the street. Across the ray of light from the hall door there streamed smoky jets from the nostrils of the horses, pacing more slowly now as the coachman brought his carriage round the curve of the drive. Every second of this last moment of expectation seemed to linger and draw itself out endlessly as Lena waited.

At last the carriage was drawn up in front of the porch. The footman had opened the door and was drawing out rug after rug, releasing the travellers. Mr. Malory's clean-shaven face was seen leaning forward as he climbed, rather stiffly, out of the carriage and turned to help his companion to alight.

Madeleine, crying, "Richard, Richard," ran to meet him, and he turned away, leaving the footman to deal with the final disencumbering of the girl inside. But Lena drew back and waited, looking out from the light and warmth of the house, past the stone pillars of the porch, into the cavern of darkness inside the carriage that still held her sister's child.

Then, like a moon out of the blackness she came, stepping lightly to the ground, a girl so slim that the folds of the brown cloak she wore hardly touched the sides of the doorway as she left the carriage. Her face, deep in the fur-edged brim of her travelling bonnet, was pale, and she did not smile, though her eyes shone as she came up the steps with both hands still buried in a hard round muff of fur that matched her bonnet.

"Mary—Mary Paradise," said Lena, and her voice sounded odd and unnatural in her own ears.

Mary, her eyes dazzled after the long darkness of the journey, moved uncertainly in the direction from which the recognised name had come.

"Is it my aunt Quibell?" she asked in a high, clear voice, like the fluting of a bird.

But, even though she kissed her and bade her welcome, Lena's heart beat with an emotion that was not tenderness towards the girl whose voice and eyes took her back to a past that was closed for her before ever William Paradise, merchant of Bristol, came to give his name and protection to Madge Quibell's unborn child.

2

Christmas Day dawned dark and bitter under an iron sky that closed down on the landscape it had powdered with snow the day before, and made even that snow seem grey.

"There is no need to ask Mary if she is rested enough to go to church with us," said Miss Martin, as she poured out

the coffee at breakfast. "Eyes so bright as hers have slept well all night through."

Mary looked at the speaker and smiled faintly, but she did not reply in words. She had, indeed, used very few words since her arrival. She seemed to rely on an eloquence of glance and gesture for the expression of her feelings.

Lena had noticed it overnight when, divested of the bonnet and shawls of her journey, the girl had stood in the midst of the rose-sprinkled room that was to be her own domain, now lit by the candles on the dressing-table and the leaping fire that Miss Martin had been feeding with small, dry, crackling logs ever since six o'clock. Her eyes, which had looked black when she came with distended pupils out of the darkness, showed grey in the candlelight under the fine lifting of her eyebrows, that sprung sloping upwards like swallows' wings with a dipping curve to the temples, where the smooth coils of hair matched them in colour and covered her ears.

Lena had come in to take her down to supper, and, as she opened the door, had noticed that the welcoming smell of the wood fire, mingled with that of hot water in a newly painted can, was already blended with an unfamiliar scent of orris-root adding a faint violet breath to the air,

"Are you ready, Mary?" she asked. "Have you found everything you need in your room?"

The girl turned her smooth head from side to side; the firelight burnished the bands of chestnut hair divided by a parting that ran from nape to brow. Her grey eyes darkened. A faint rose tinged the clear whiteness of her cheeks. She drew a little breath of pleasure, and stretched out her hands towards the shining chintz of the bed-curtains, the shining pool of the mirror between the candles. Her slender waist turned above the fullness of her skirt with a movement so easy and supple that Lena, watching it, was filled with the adoring envy which brings to some women the first bitter taste of their own middle age.

The gesture was enough. Without waiting for any spoken reply, Lena said :

"I'm glad it pleases you. Miss Martin and I have left the shelves empty and put no pictures on the wall so that you may have room for your own things here. Are you ready to come down ? "

"Quite ready," she said, and it was as though a bell chimed in the scented air.

Lena stood in the doorway while the girl, holding one hand curved like a shell behind the flame, blew out each candle and then moved as silently as a shadow to the fireplace to secure the wire guard in front of the still blazing fire.

Was it, Lena asked herself, only the far-off stirring of her own lost enchantment that lent so swift a grace to the automatic discharge of these small domestic precautions, or would the quiet precision of Mary's every movement convey to any unrelated onlooker the same almost intolerable sense of physical harmony as was now stinging her own eyelids with bewildered tears ?

Shaking herself free from this useless and unwonted speculation, Lena led the way downstairs, explaining the intricacies of the small house, so full of staircases and passages and doors.

"The big green-baize-covered swing door at the foot of the stairs," she said, "leads to the hall you saw from the gallery outside your room. Miss Martin and I spend our days there attending to the library and to her needlework. You shall help us there to-morrow or the day after. To-night, when you have had your supper in the dining-room, we will sit for a little while in the parlour, and you shall see the study, and then, if you can find your own way up to bed, you will be doing very well for the first evening."

Mary had been perfectly able to find her way from the parlour door to her own room, thereby earning Miss Martin's good opinion for sense, a quality the lady so often found lacking in the young. She took her flat

candlestick in one hand and, holding her skirt in front with the other, seemed to float rather than to run up the narrow staircase. She emerged, haloed by the light she carried, on the gallery, where, without hesitation, she reached her own door, and vanished behind it after waving a final good night to the ladies who stood watching her from the hall below.

"Dear Lena," said Miss Martin, congratulating. "How birdlike !"

"I hope she is going to be happy with us."

Miss Martin drew in her chin and cast a startled look upwards into her friend's grave and rather anxious face.

"Why should you doubt it, Lena? We shall show her *every* kindness."

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you, Christie, for the kindness of your welcome and for all I know you are purposed to do for the child. But her happiness will not depend on us alone."

"She seems of a happy and gentle disposition," Miss Martin reflected, as they went back into the parlour to complete their final decoration of the little Christmas-tree. "I thought her unusually silent for a young person. I myself put it down to the fatigue of the journey."

"I daresay. She must be tired," Lena assented. The memory of another mute yet eloquent figure stirred in her mind and she heard once again the wild music, and saw the torches, and smelt the resinous sharp fragrance of pine branches that decorated the vaulted hall where she and that silent, compelling partner had danced together on Christmas Eve nineteen years ago.

As she lay awake for a few minutes that night Miss Martin thought Lena's silence meant that she was thinking of her dead sister. The girl was probably very like her mother. She had a certain resemblance to Lena—the same long, delicate hands, the same clear skin, though her eyes and her voice were quite different. Perhaps she inherited them from her father. If so, thought Miss Martin, Mr. Paradise must have been a very attractive man. But she decided to

keep this reflection to herself, as one it would ill become a maiden lady to utter.

"It is a good thing," Miss Martin went on, taking Mary's smile for consent, "a *very* good thing that we have so short a way to walk to church. I'm afraid many people in the lower town will go to Holy Trinity. Such a great pity, on Christmas Day. I hope, my dear, that you possess sensible walking boots."

"I have snow-shoes. We always wore them for snow at the Pensionnat Hauteville," said Mary, and again it seemed to Lena that the utterance of the commonplace sentence filled the place with music.

"A foreign habit and a very sensible one." Miss Martin was determined to approve. "Your Aunt Lena has not introduced snow-shoes here, though, as you see, we have adopted the Continental breakfast—coffee and rolls."

"But the sausages and bacon are English, and the orange marmalade," said Lena. "You'll have to get accustomed to a hearty breakfast again, Mary. There is no *déjeuner* at twelve o'clock. Miss Martin and I dine at half-past one."

Mary seemed to experience no difficulty in resuming this habit. When she had eaten her sausage and drunk her second cup of coffee, she rose swiftly and quietly from her chair, ran round the table, and laid a small package she had been concealing in her lap by each of the ladies' plates.

"From Aunt and Uncle Vidler in Neuchâtel and from me—a Christmas greeting. They joined with me; they asked me to make the purchases for them in Paris."

"That is very kind, too kind," expostulated Miss Martin. "Our own small gifts for you are on the Christmas-tree. Would you like us to put yours among them, to be opened when we light up the tree after tea?"

"No," said Lena, "we'll open Mary's present now." She had seen the girl's face, and had read in it the nervous impatience of one entrusted with her first important

commission, and anxious lest she had failed in her choice.

So the coloured ribbons round the little boxes of pale blue cardboard sprinkled with minute gilt stars were untied, while the young donor sat, her hands clasped in her lap, her lips pressed tightly together, her whole bearing expressing far more strain than so small an occasion seemed to warrant. The girl's high sensibility was evident. They would have to consider it in dealing with her, unless, as Lena hoped, it was no more than a transitory condition that would cure itself once she had recovered from her journey and begun to find herself at home in her new surroundings.

A moment later she had to exercise all her own self-control in order not to betray her sense of the extravagant unsuitability of the contents of the box Miss Martin had now unpacked.

For Mary Paradise, left to herself in the arcades of the Palais Royal, had selected for the determined little spinster who presided over the economies of Little Chantry House a case of cut and gilded glass scent-bottles. There were three of them : *Chypre*, *Frangipani*, *Rose Blanche* (the favourite perfume of the Empress), in a nest of rose-coloured velvet. The case itself was covered in pale green morocco, with bands and clasps of cut gilt metal studded with coral. A gilded key, with streamers of rose and green satin ribbon threaded through the perforations of its ornate handle, reposed in a small case of its own.

Miss Martin did not conceal her astonishment.

"My dear child," she said. "This is a very beautiful casket, but quite unsuitable to my age. You have evidently chosen what you most admired, given what you would admire yourself. A generous thought. We will place the handsome casket in the parlour cabinet. Closed, I think."

Lena looked at the girl. Her face had grown a shade paler, but there were no tears in her eyes. She straightened her shoulders, and sat quiet and upright in her chair, trying

to smile, not showing her mortification. The Pensionnat Hauteville had instilled good manners in its pupils ; or was it some native and inherited pride that checked the struggles of that too easily roused sensibility she had already recognised?

Quickly, to direct Miss Martin's flustered attention from the gift she might at any moment decide to reject, Lena tore off the wrappings from her own parcel.

It contained a paper-weight. On an oblong base of clouded pale-blue glass lay a dimpled hand, modelled in alabaster, the delicately tapered fingers just touching the cerulean surface, the wrist finished off with a cuff of pierced and scalloped embroidery. The actual weight and probable value of the object only made its frivolity more alarming. Lena fought down a mounting desire to laugh. The thing was absurd, Parisian, luxurious. It lay on the worn mended table-cloth, turning the familiar comfort of the little dining-room into dowdiness by contrast with all it suggested of evanescence and the perpetual renewal of luxury in the life of which it was a symbol.

"Why, Mary," she said, "have you had your own hand modelled for me?" And, even as she spoke, she was ashamed of the flattery so hastily called up to fill the place of gratitude in her thanks.

Mary leaned forward a little across the table, her eyes bright with admiration of the bauble.

"Do you like it, Aunt Lena?" she breathed. "It is not my hand. In the shop they say it is a model of that of the Empress Eugénie herself."

"There certainly is a wedding-ring on the third finger. The left hand, I observe," said Miss Martin, peering at the paper-weight, her chin drawn very tightly down to the brooch that fastened her collar.

This was true. A gilded circlet did appear below the row of little turquoises that gave the last touch of absurdity to the invention.

"It is very, very pretty." Lena was able to put rea

enthusiasm into this comment. "But, now I am no longer to get your weekly letter, it will be difficult to find anything suitable for it to keep in place on my desk. I think it must be just an ornament. It will fit the window-ledge of my bedroom where the light will show its dimples. Come and help me find the right place for it."

They rose from the table, and Miss Martin kissed the girl.

You have a kind heart," she said. "I am *touched* by your thought of me."

Then she locked the little case, put the key in her reticule, and went into the parlour to make room in the cabinet that held her mother's old Spode and Chelsea pieces, for this sumptuous if rather odd addition to her treasures.

An hour later the cold air rang with the chiming of Christmas bells from the church tower. Their clangour reached the little house. Any conversation between its inmates had to be carried on in shouts so long as it continued. It was a good thing, thought Lena, as she tied the fresh satin strings of her plum-coloured velvet bonnet and fastened the braided frogs of her fur-lined winter cloak, a quite amusingly fortunate circumstance that Mary Paradise did not seem to want to ask any questions for the moment. Even with all the lattices closed, the sound of the church bells hummed through the rooms and passages, and Matilda, though fully able to make herself heard through any noise, was apt to make mistakes about orders given her when they were ringing.

But Mary, as she stepped across the flagstones of the path that led between high banks of swept and frozen snow from the garden gate to the church porch, seemed to move through the thronging vibrations from the tower as though thrilled and stimulated by its cadences.

"O·COME·ALL·YE·FAITH·FUL
JOY·FUL AND TRI·UMPHANT . . ."

sang the bells, falling flat, as chimes will, on the note of "joyful." And the faithful came, climbing up from the
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town and crossing Castle Gate : the women in their shawls and bonnets, as curious to see the new arrival as the men in their curly top-hats and brass-buttoned overcoats who followed their families down the aisle and sat by the doors of the high, dark pews.

Those who sat in the nave, and had arrived before the ladies from the Chantry House, had the best view. The three ladies walked the whole length of the centre aisle on their way to their own pew on the north transept. Miss Martin came first, her always slightly curtsying gait accentuated by the double excitement of the occasion. Between her and the tall form of Miss Quibell walked a slight figure in brown, no taller than Miss Martin but carrying itself with so slim an erectness that she made the elderly little woman who preceded her seem bent and awkward. Those who so far forgot their decorum as to look round before the party reached them, saw a delicate and lovely face framed in the fur edging of a drawn-silk hood. They noticed that the little fur muff that probably hid a prayer-book as well as the girl's hands was carried rather higher than it was customary to carry muffs in Queen's Beaton—only a few inches away from the crisp butterfly bow that tied the hood under her rounded chin.

Once they had reached their own pew in the chancel immediately behind the one occupied by the Rector's wife and her little stepdaughter, Georgina Malory, the Chantry House ladies could be seen only during such parts of the service as required that the whole congregation should stand. At these times it was observed that Miss Quibell was obliged to find the Psalms for her niece and to offer her other occasional assistance with her prayer-book. This, as the people who noticed it admitted to one another afterwards, was but natural, seeing that the poor young lady had left England as a child and had been brought up by foreigners, no better than heathen most likely.

So engrossed was the more inquisitive section of the congregation in this extra-devotional interest that most of them

were unaware of the entrance, what time the choir was filing into place, of two persons to the Malquoits pew. It was not until Mr. Malory had settled into his ten-minute sermon from the text :

" Lo ! the star which they saw in the East went before them,"

that anyone in the nave had time to observe Mr. James Towyn, who, after a lapse of two years, had resumed his right to worship at St. Simeon's on Christmas Day.

The following afternoon Lena took Mary down to the Rectory to make acquaintance with little Georgina, and to settle terms and schoolroom hours with Mrs. Malory. Before they had been many minutes in the house, however, Madeleine sent the child upstairs with her new governess.

" Show Miss Paradise your schoolroom, Georgie, my dear, and, if she likes, take her to the nursery to make friends with baby before you bring her back to us," she said, having shown, Lena thought, singularly little interest in the new arrival.

No sooner was the door closed behind the pair than this failure of interest in the matter most obviously claiming her attention was explained.

" Oh, Lena," exclaimed Mrs. Malory, throwing aside the embroidered slippers on which she had been at work. " I have hardly been able to wait to see you alone. I was so agitated yesterday. And of course I cannot discuss it with Richard. Even though it is nearly three years ago now, it was difficult to face him with composure. Of course he recognised me—he must have done so, though I am now a married woman and he never saw me wearing a bonnet. I saw him looking a great deal in my direction, though I never caught his eye."

" You mean in church yesterday," said Lena. " Which of the two was Mr. Towyn ? I forgot to ask Miss Martin."

" Of course. You have not seen him till now. I had

forgotten." Madeleine chattered excitedly. "The fair one, rather like Lord Byron only blond. Did you not think so? He has grown handsomer than ever. His eyes are so blue and yet melancholy, and his mouth droops a little, as it was not used to do. The other one with whiskers must be his cousin, Sir Egerton Malquoits, who is to have the Castle when Lady Gervaise dies, though the title died out with her father. Richard spoke to both of them afterwards, but I hurried out with little Georgie. I wrote to Gennie this morning—a long letter, to tell her I had seen him. She does not care for him now, but she will always take an interest in him, and I thought that she would not be displeased to know that he does not look very happy. I thought it wiser not to tell her that he is handsomer than ever."

Lena smiled at Madeleine's assumption of matronly discretion, but was not able to share very fully in her absorbing interest in the problem of whether the young man had recognised her in her bonnet and mantle.

"Now I think of it," Madeleine went on, "he never saw us out of doors but on horseback. I must have looked very different. And then, let us not forget that he had eyes only for Gennie on those occasions. Still, he did seem to look a good deal in my direction."

"It was difficult for him not to do so," Lena pointed out, "sitting, as he did, immediately opposite your pew."

She forbore to communicate her own impression, which was that if the beautiful and melancholy youth could have been accused of so unlikely an impertinence as staring in church, it was not at Madeleine Malory, but at the girl in the pew behind her who had had some difficulty in finding the way about in her prayer-book.

"Well," said Madeleine, forsaking yesterday for to-morrow, "now that I know he is in the neighbourhood I shall be prepared to meet him. Richard and I are to dine at Beaton Clarence House on New Year's Eve. It would be strange if Mr. James Towyn were to be of the party. I could

face him quite well, I know. He was a sufferer too. But I could not meet Lady Gervaise. Fortunately, that is out of the question. She never dines out in the Beaton's. I am so thankful that I have never yet even seen her carriage on the road. If I did, I should do the opposite thing to Miss Martin. I should run away from it round the nearest corner."

They discussed the not very difficult position in which Madeleine was quite unlikely to find herself on New Year's Day, and presently they were interrupted by the return of Georgina and Mary, bringing the baby Ettie with them.

"Oh, Mamma," cried Georgina, bursting into the room full of importance, "only look what baby has done. She has climbed on Miss Paradise's lap and pulled her bonnet strings undone and pulled off her bonnet. See, I have it," and she swung Mary's drawn-silk hood by the strings as she danced round the room.

Mary followed with Ettie clinging to her skirts. The pulling off of her hood had not ruffled the chestnut smoothness of her hair, but her cheeks were flushed a little, and her breath came quickly through her parted lips, as though she had not quite recovered it after romping with the child.

Madeleine rose to take Ettie in her arms. As she stood for a moment by Mary's side, Lena was startled to observe how plain the young mother looked. Madeleine, who, though not so pretty as her twin, had always been thought a good-looking girl, was suddenly become rather heavy featured, almost coarse. Her dark hair seemed without lustre, her eyes too near together, her nose and mouth too far apart. It was as if her comely face had lost proportion and were out of drawing. The moment that gave the impression gave its reason. Side by side with the delicate perfection of features, the complete harmony of line and colour, in Mary Paradise's face, that of the young matron, only a few years her senior, lost all power to charm. The faint rose flush on the girl's clear cheek made the young mother's healthy bloom seem gross. Some faces have this power of reducing any other beauty to apparent dislocation, but it was the first time

Lena Quibell had seen this effect of juxtaposition. For a moment she felt a thrill, as of superstitious alarm, as though some feat of witchcraft had been performed in the Rectory drawing-room.

Then Ettie, struggling out of her mother's arms, broke the spell.

"Ettie is bikkit," she chirruped, making for the low table on which tea was being laid by a servant.

"She's seen the sugar biscuits," explained Madeleine proudly. "She's just begun to say that. 'Ettie is' means anything she likes. If she dislikes anything, she says, 'Ettie not.'"

She caught up the child just in time to prevent her from taking a pink-coated biscuit from the silver cake-dish on the table, whereupon Ettie demonstrated the accuracy of her mother's account of her linguistic achievement by exclaiming twice very severely, "Ettie *not* Mam-ma."

In the laughter caused by this infant frankness Lena lost sight for a moment of the effect that had so startled her: but later, when Mary was about to tie on her hood again, and paused with it in her hand while Madeleine spoke to her of the arrangements for next week, when her duties were to begin, the contrast reasserted itself.

As they went back up the hill from the solid Queen Anne rooms of the spacious and comfortable Rectory to the rambling and inconvenient if picturesque little Tudor house in Castle Gate, Lena wondered if the silent girl who walked beside her had any inkling of the effect she could produce. It must, she thought, be as impossible for Mary to know how Madeleine was disfigured by contrast with her as she hoped it was for Madeleine to realise it. "Even if they were to see themselves in the same mirror," she told herself, "neither might see what I saw this afternoon." And then she began to wonder if anyone else would notice the same thing. Possibly not. Perhaps it was only a momentary illusion of her own, prompted by the blood tie that is deeper and stranger than any bond made by a willing affection.

Mary Paradise was not lovely as the moon is, with a pale, uncertain beauty. She shone like a star. She had not that blazing, sun-like quality that compels all eyes. You had to look more than once at her before you realised how really lovely she was. She grew lovelier as you looked at her. Lena broke off in her reflection. The tall young man with the melancholy face had looked and looked again across the church yesterday. And Madeleine had been wrong in supposing that it was the Rector's wife, once Miss Seymour of Abbot's Beaton, who had drawn that returning glance. Lena herself, looking up from the page of Mary Paradise's prayer-book to which she had directed the girl as they stood for the Christmas Psalm, had seen the blue eyes fixed on Mary's face.

And when Mary, lifting her eyes from the page, had raised her clear voice to join in the singing, there was no doubt that her gaze met his.

" Out of the ivory palaces whereby they have made thee glad."

They sang the words together, and, as they sang, it had seemed as though each were singing to the other alone.

Madeleine drove back from the dinner-party at Beaton Clarence House in the forenoon of the second of January. She had spent two nights with the Horsleys, completely unembarrassed by any difficulty about meeting Mr. Towyn, who had not been invited. She heard Lady Miriam Horsley telling another guest that the young man had gone off to Cannes with his mother, who suffered from bronchial trouble in the winter, and would probably have to go to the south of France after Christmas every year now. There had been a good deal of talk about the new sleeping-carriages on the French railway which some people preferred, while others found the narrow berths even more uncomfortable than the pillow and rugs of ordinary night journeys. Mr. Towyn, she gathered, had travelled in one of these

innovations, but Lady Gervaise, as was to be expected, had preferred to make the whole journey by stages in her own carriage. Madeleine had come up to the library within ten minutes of her return, ostensibly to change a book, but actually to chatter to Lena of last night's rather solemn dissipation.

"You can imagine, dear Lena, how deeply I was relieved when I learnt that Mr. Towyn would not be among the guests," she repeated, having inaugurated her visit by the same statement. They were alone in the library, it being close upon the mid-day dinner-hour, and Miss Christina having gone in to superintend Matilda's final preparations for their own meal.

"It must have been a great relief," Lena said, and felt her own heart lightened of a foolish apprehension that had troubled her ever since Christmas Day.

Mary passed through the hall on her way to prepare herself for dinner after her morning's work with Georgina. But Madeleine did not break off her narration, even though the Rectory dinner would be served before she could get back to it unless she left at once.

"They say," she said, giving Mary an absent-minded nod, "that Lady Gervaise wants him to marry Miss Knowltyne, a very rich heiress, the only daughter of a Manchester cotton spinner, but that he is not eager to marry at all. He is said to be quite irresistible, and is rather wild too."

Lena, to whom this kind of gossip was unfamiliar and not particularly interesting, said she supposed most young men were gay and pleasure-loving. Mary, who had reached the door under the gallery which led to the private part of the house, though she did not appear to linger as she opened it, turned her head slightly towards the speaker, as though what they were saying had attracted her attention; as though, thought Lena, it had some personal significance for her.

As the swing door closed behind her niece, Lena noticed

that the room darkened. For a moment she fought with the evidence of her senses, telling herself that she had allowed the girl's beauty to delude her into fancifulness. But the darkness increased rapidly, and Madeleine, who had begun to draw her shawl about her shoulders and to look round the room for the mantle she had discarded on arrival, became alarmed.

"Another snowstorm," she predicted, peering out through the glass porch. "A worse one than we have had yet, to judge by the sky."

Lena joined her and looked upwards. The sky was curdled in great swirls of black and ochre cloud that whirled and eddied in some upper current of the air, driven by a wind that as yet left the leafless branches of the churchyard trees and the bare cords of creeper on the walls unshaken. Even as they watched them the yellow clouds yielded to the black, and daylight was swallowed up as by the onset of tropic darkness.

"Look, Madeleine, water-drops. It is thawing," Lena exclaimed, as the panes of the little greenhouse began to stream with moisture from the icicles that had fringed the gutter for a month and were now weeping themselves away far more quickly than they had grown.

"Oh, Lena, I must have a lantern. The lamps at Castle Gate are not lit—of course not—at one o'clock in the day."

Miss Christina came in, followed by Mary carrying candles.

"I have never known a thaw bring darkness before," said Miss Martin, in the pleased voice of one who enjoys unusual events. "You must have Matilda to take you back to the Rectory, my dear," she went on, addressing Madeleine. "I will send her to get a lantern and her cape and hood."

"Thank you so much, but I am sure Richard will come for me or send up one of the servants. May I wait a few minutes longer?" Madeleine expostulated. But Miss Martin had gone.

Mary placed the lighted candles in their candlesticks on the long table among the current magazines, and crossed the hall to join the two ladies who stood by the stove. The leaves of the geranium plant that stood on the shelves in the porch showed in the light from the candles bright against the livid blackness outside. The water glistened in straight lines down the glass panes, that now poured with the condensation of the air inside the room.

"They are sudden, your storms in Queen's Beaton," she said, with a little air of graciousness, as if anxious not to appear either critical or alarmed.

"This can hardly be called a storm, Miss Paradise," observed Madeleine, reassuring herself, too, in her own way. "The air is perfectly still outside."

Miss Martin re-entered the room tying her own bonnet-strings as she came.

"Matilda, I am *sorry* to have to tell you," she said, and her emphasis was sharp with displeasure, "Matilda has refused to go out. She believes this to be the Day of Judgment. So *I* will accompany you down the hill myself."

At that moment, as if to justify both Mary and Matilda, the house was shaken by the onset of a raging wind. The storm let loose its hurricane. It blew down a chimney in Castle Gate and tore great branches off the trees in garden and churchyard, so that there was a crash of falling bricks, and a splintering of green wood outside the windows. The dwarf filled the air indoors with choking smoke, and scattered red-hot ashes on the hearthstone beneath its feet. The howling of the wind outside the house was pierced by the shrieks of Matilda, in whom conviction of sin had taken place with a thoroughness that had driven her into detailed and babbling confession to some deity who seemed to be accessible in the passage on the other side of the door.

It was clearly out of the question for Madeleine to attempt to return to the Rectory, and for some little time they were all three too much astonished and alarmed to

do anything but stand as near to one another and as far away from the still smoking dwarf as possible. Gradually, as the clouds eased themselves of their load in rain, the darkness began to thin. The criss-cross of the lattices showed black against a fading yellow that dwindled to twilight grey, and a veering of the tornado around the chimney-pots sucked back the smoke of the belching stove. Matilda's voice sank to an intermittent murmur behind the door, and the candles began to flicker wanly in the creeping daylight. But the storm was no less violent though its terror of darkness was over. It flung its rain against the window in heavy splashes, as a groom throws water from a bucket over the legs of a standing horse, and the swishing air was still full of the sharp report of broken trees.

Mary was the first to recover some measure of self-possession. She crossed the stone floor and, holding up her full skirts away from her feet with one hand, began to sweep up the still glowing ashes with the witch's broom that was always propped against the side of the fireplace. Lena, to whose arm Madeleine had been clinging with a certain air of possessiveness, released herself and went to the window to wipe away the mist that clouded its panes, and Miss Martin hurried into the house, saying over her shoulder :
" We must have our dinner at once. You will join us, dear Madeleine ? "

Matilda was absolved from the duty of waiting at table in order that she might recover her wits and dish up the potatoes, that had boiled dry and were just about to stick to the saucepan in her deserted kitchen, and Mary undertook to change the dishes as the meal went on.

The fright she had just undergone, and the relief she was now experiencing, so far from detaching Madeleine's thoughts from the subject she had come to discuss with Lena, only made them flow more freely. Having no restraint placed on her tongue by a listening servant, she allowed herself complete freedom in discussing the anomalies of Lady Gervaise Towyn's position and the tales she

had heard of her son. Though she naturally did not again refer to Genevieve's girlish discomfiture in any overt way, she made it clear that Mr. James Towyn was not, in her opinion, altogether to blame for his present reputation as a rather fast young man. Then, aware of Miss Martin's disapproval of this kind of talk, she tried to reinstate herself in the little lady's grace by persuading her to tell them of the wonders of the Roman chapel in the Castle, and by asking her intelligent questions about the difference in Popish and Protestant altar furnishing, a subject she felt to be becoming in the conversation of a Rector's wife.

"Richard likes ornament, I know, and he has told me how much he used to be in sympathy with poor Mr. Martin," she went on, giving herself very matronly airs, "but our present curate—Mr. Simpson, you know"—she flung the information at Mary—"Mr. Simpson is so very severe. I declare, we are both quite alarmed lest he should write to the Bishop about our pretty service. I suppose he had it all his own way yesterday, as the Rector was away. Did he make you say the Psalms?"

Mr. Simpson had not had the Psalms spoken instead of sung on New Year's Day, as Madeleine very well knew, but she was excited, and seemed, Lena could not help thinking, to be showing off a little.

If this were so, and if the change in Madeleine's usually irreproachable manners were really due to a desire to awe and impress Mary Paradise, Lena was not sorry to see that Madeleine's airs and graces failed in their effort. The girl listened politely to all Mrs. Malory said, but the attention she paid to her did not once make her miss the right moment for rising from her own place to carry out her self-imposed duties. Once or twice, hesitating as to where she must place the dishes Matilda delivered into her hands at the kitchen door, she looked towards her aunt for guidance, and obeyed her nod or followed the direction of her glance. It was, Lena felt, in some odd way a privilege to be in this silent and effective communication with the girl whose

deftness and precision seemed to arise from a physical intelligence, a gift of nature that would never leave her at a loss or find her clumsy or undignified in any emergency. The girl's mute glances formed a bond between them against which all Madeleine's assertion of previous and greater intimacy was powerless.

"She is," thought Lena, "my own flesh and blood. Madeleine knows it, and feels a little jealous."

And then as Mary paused at Madeleine's side to offer her the dish of cheese-cakes that completed the simple meal, Lena saw once again the young woman's pleasant face grow plain and undistinguished to the eye that rested on it side by side with Mary Paradise.

The Rector arrived armed with waterproof and storm cloaks before they had risen from the table. A bottle of Miss Martin's hoarded though not venerable port was opened, and they sat drinking good fortune to the new year, while he told them of the reports that were already coming in of the ravages of the storm. It had burst an hour earlier at Quern's Hill, south of the Beatons, and the postmaster had telegraphed a warning. The message had been sent up to the Rectory, reaching it just as the extraordinary darkness fell at one o'clock. Mr. Malory had since heard that two men had been killed by a falling oak at Quobb's Farm. And Fossett's van, that was to have come over from Quernsford with eggs and butter to the Monday market, had not arrived.

Towards three o'clock there was a lull in the storm, and, covered from head to foot in cloak and mackintosh, Mr. and Mrs. Malory set out to walk down the hill.

"The wind will push us back. It nearly pushed me over as I came up," said Mr. Malory, as the hall door flew open, driven by the blast.

He had spoken very kindly to Mary when bidding the household good-bye, and, though she had made no attempt to hasten him, Madeleine had, Lena did not fail to observe, drummed a little with her foot, as if in impatience to be

off, when Mary, raising her grey eyes to the Rector's face, had thanked him for his welcome, and had answered his questions with complete self-possession and a pretty dignity of her own.

It was not until late that evening, when Mary had taken her candle and gone up to bed, that Miss Martin, warming her feet on the fender before the dying fire, remarked, without any previous reference to the subject :

"It is quite right of dear Madeleine to keep our little Mary at a certain distance at first, especially as she is in the relation of an employer to her."

"Yes, of course," said Lena.

"I was a little surprised," Miss Martin went on, "to learn that so much is known of affairs at the Castle. A stranger might almost imagine that there was some intercourse with society in the Beatons."

"I don't think Mary paid very much attention to our talk," Lena answered disingenuously, adding, "She was preoccupied with the business of waiting on us."

"Then, Lena, if you will allow me to say so, you are mistaken," said Miss Martin ; and, after a pause "I thought the child behaved extremely well."

CHAPTER IV

DEATH OF A TOY

I

Spring, never a late comer to the Beaton Valley, was earlier than usual that year. The iron frosts of December, and the great gale that swept them away, had made short if fierce work of the winter. Mary Paradise brought in snowdrops from the Beaton riverside before the end of January, and there were primroses on the banks below the chestnut avenue in Malquoits Park while the letters from the school friend at Lausanne still chronicled skating and tobogganing and the visitation of *la bise*. The Swiss letters, it was only fair to admit, took a fortnight to reach Queen's Beaton, and some of them got lost or delayed on the way. This was only to be expected at a time when, as the historians tell us, post censorship was looked upon as such a natural thing that, when one Cabinet did not wish to make a direct suggestion to another, it wrote a letter to its own Ambassador, and the foreign Cabinet was thereafter understood to be perfectly aware of the matter.

Miss Martin was also aware of this condition of things. She had learned during the weeks when she had visited the Castle daily that part of the Malquoits routine was the despatch of special messengers with the Castle letter-bags. That this was years ago, and in the days when the French exiles living at Queen's Beaton House still kept an air of political intrigue alive round Castle Gate, made no difference to her conviction that no one could be too careful about foreign correspondence. She warned Mary, not only of the risk of losing her own letters, but also of the danger

of giving away, in the most perfect innocence, matters that might be construed into evidence of treason.

"It is well known that the most *highly* placed persons write, in veiled allusions, to other friends abroad. You must be careful, Mary, to give your young friend none but the most carefully *selected* news."

Lena tried to assure her friend that schoolgirls in Switzerland would never come under official suspicion as recipients of political information from so obscure a correspondent as Mary Paradise, in so remote a place as Queen's Beaton. But Miss Martin was not satisfied.

"Colonel Seymour is at the War Office. It is known that the Rector is his son-in-law. We ourselves live in Castle Gate."

Though perfectly ready to acknowledge her own inconspicuous rectitude, she could not ignore the share these two good men took in public affairs.

"It is our duty to *protect* them," she insisted. But the protection of Colonel Seymour and the Rector was not to be carried out by means of any private censorship of Mary's correspondence.

When Miss Martin suggested that the three or four long letters Mary wrote every Sunday afternoon should be submitted to her perusal before they were folded separately and placed in the same envelope, addressed each week to one or other of their recipients in rotation, she was met with a complete failure to comply with the suggestion.

For a week or two, while the weather, though mild, was still too cold to make sitting in her bedroom possible, Mary wrote at the round table in the parlour. A bedroom fire was a luxury, reserved for sickness or for welcome to a traveller, and Mary's had not been lit since her arrival. Lena wrote her own letters at her writing-table near the window, while Miss Martin, who had few private correspondents, dozed in her easy chair, her brother's copy of *The Christian Year* lying open in her lap at the page devoted

to the particular celebration ordained by the Church for that day.

On the first Sunday, Mary covered the thin glazed sheets of foreign notepaper with her elegant, pointed writing, and folded each letter with deliberate care. She put them, letter by letter, as they were finished, into small transparent envelopes inscribed with the name of the person to whom they were addressed. When the last of them was finished and blotted, she placed all the smaller envelopes into one larger and stouter one, which she sealed and directed. When Miss Martin opened her eyes as the rattle of tea-cups in the hall announced that Matilda had returned from Sunday school, Mary was putting the half-ounce weight into position on the little letter scales she had fetched from Lena's table.

"Finished your correspondence, I see," said Miss Martin, pretending she had been wide awake all the time. "Now let me make sure that there is no dangerous news in those long letters before Matilda takes them down to the post-office."

"I'm sorry, Miss Martin. I've sealed the envelope and put the stamps on," said Mary, with the prettiest inflection of regret.

It was quite true. The wick of the candle she had blown out was still smoking ; the aromatic smell of freshly melted sealing-wax still filled the room. Miss Martin had missed her moment. She must have been asleep.

"Ah, well," she said, a little confused by the situation she created, "I hope you were very careful not to speak of anything but the daily events of our own little home."

"There were the news from my friends to answer also," said Mary demurely.

Miss Martin's attention was diverted for a moment.

"You have been so long away from your native land," she pointed out, "that you forget that news is singular in English."

Is

"Oh, yes," Mary agreed, "I think always of *les nouvelles*. Thank you, Miss Martin. I will remember now."

On the second Sunday, Mary brought out a fine lawn handkerchief she was embroidering and settled down to work at it after dinner.

"You sew on Sundays? A Continental habit," observed Miss Martin, fixing her spectacles on her nose and opening the *Christian Year* at the page where she had placed the ribbon book-mark a week ago.

Mary lifted her eyes and smiled in agreement with the observation.

"Have you no letters to write?" Miss Martin enquired.

"Not to-day. There was only one, from Emilie Dufour, this week. I must wait for the others that may come on Tuesday, to answer all at the same time. It is an economy," said Mary.

There was no reply to that. Miss Martin herself had provided the girl with the thinnest paper it was possible to use for letter-writing, and had enjoined brevity in each separate enclosure in order that one sevenpenny stamp should frank the whole of her correspondence at one time.

Miss Martin's slumbers were more fitful; the *Christian Year* occupied her attention more fully that afternoon than was at all customary. She was wide awake before Matilda came in, and, at the first clink of china, rose from the fireside and went out to select a fresh pot of jam from the pantry shelves, though the strawberry preserve was only half finished, as she knew perfectly well.

Lena, who had taken no part in the discussion on the previous Sunday, appeared to notice nothing unusual in to-day's procedure, and helped herself to bramble jelly without a word. But she was aware that Mary's eyes shone with a glance that looked like triumph, though her manner was as charming and graceful as before.

On the third Sunday afternoon the ladies occupied the parlour alone.

"Where is Mary?" asked Miss Martin, as she settled into her chair.

"Upstairs in her own room," said Lena, bending the point of a quill pen back against her thumbnail to test its condition. "It is quite warm there in this sunshine."

Miss Martin looked at her friend over her spectacles, but she said nothing.

"She has just borrowed my letter scales," Lena added.

But the swift whisper of her own pen across the pages of her correspondence was interrupted several times as she glanced across to the fireplace to make sure that Christie had fallen asleep in peace. She did not agree that there was any reason why Mary's letters to Switzerland should be read, but she was not altogether on Mary's side in the first encounter of will that had marked the even flow of their joint life since Christmas. She wondered a little what would happen if any serious issue were at stake between them. Miss Martin was not accustomed to defeat. Lena looked again. Christie was asleep. She had not taken the matter very deeply to heart. Dear Christie!

But that little conflict did not last through January, and it was now getting near to St. Valentine's Day. The buds on the jessamine under the bedroom windows were already showing tiny points of yellow where the flowers would break and star the leafless creeper before many days of sun were over.

Mary was quite at home. She had fallen into their ways so easily that it was hardly ever necessary for her to be told of any rule of the Chantry House; and Miss Martin's house was governed by many rules none the less rigid that they had never been formulated, and were only mentioned when they were broken. Mary's advent had not caused any modification of them, though fresh ones were laid down for her. There was, for instance, the rule that the parlour fire was never lit until dinner-time, which might have clashed with the new rule that she must practise her singing for half an hour before breakfast. Mary met this by wearing a knitted

spencer while she sang, and by the declaration that singing in itself made her warm.

"It's the way of breathing," she explained.

Miss Martin had not realised that the breath of song had calorific value. "*Though*," she said, "now you tell me so, I remember, as a girl, remarking how extremely hot the *singers* all seemed to be when I was taken to hear *La Sombambula* many years ago . . . especially at the end of the performance ! Still," she added, "while the cold weather lasts you had better leave the parlour door open, so that the heat from the kitchen can come in."

Fortunately the weather did not remain cold for very many days, so that it was not necessary to set the parlour door open. Indeed, Mary kept it closed without reference to the temperature while she sang up and down the scale, taking the high A so clearly that Lena, dressing in her room above the parlour, waited for the loud, sweet note, and smiled with pleasure as the voice held it for a beat and sent it up again, firm and round, before the descending exercise.

After breakfast, Mary made her own bed and dusted her bedroom before setting off, at ten minutes to nine, for the Rectory, where she spent the morning teaching Georgina for two hours, and taking her for a walk in the park or through Queen's Beaton woods when lessons were over.

In the afternoon she would help her aunt in the library or undertake the preparation of some piece of needlework under Miss Martin's directions. As the days lengthened, Lena would take her on a country walk before tea, leaving Miss Martin in charge of the library on the days when there were no parcels of books to be despatched by the afternoon post. It was a real pleasure to Lena to discover that Mary was a good walker, quite able to enjoy five miles on the level road through the park, and an eager scrambler among the footpaths that climbed the wooded hillside on the west of the Beaton Valley.

On two or three afternoons each week aunt and niece would set off together, and, in spite of the corsets and

crinolines they wore, would walk for two hours, seeing the spring begin by waterside and meadow, and laughing at the gambols of the first lambs in the wide pastures where they played.

But, though Mary was a good companion, attentive to and amused by anything Lena pointed out as they walked along, she did not contribute very much of her own to the conversation. She had no knowledge of nature, and, Lena noticed, no real love of it. Her enjoyment of Spring was partly polite acquiescence in her aunt's own spoken delight, and partly the response of young blood to the quickening of the year.

Sometimes she would speak a little of her life at school, and with the relatives at Neuchâtel where she had spent her holidays; but she never, unless in answer to a direct question, referred to her work in the Rectory schoolroom. Lena, who was prepared to give advice or assistance over the small problems that might so easily beset a girl in the first months of her teaching experience, realised very quickly that Mary was unaware of any difficulty in her work. Georgina, though a spoilt, was an intelligent little girl, and she was really musical. Moreover, the distinction of having an almost French governess all to herself had pleased her from the outset, and her father's threat of sending her away to school if she did not behave well with Miss Paradise took effect.

Like all healthy and active-minded children, Georgina was happier when her mind was fully employed. The change of discipline from her stepmother's rather over-anxious desire not to appear harsh to Mary's new and by no means incapable authority was steadying the eight-year-old child, who had been spoilt by Madeleine at first and then left to the casual supervision of the upper servants until the new-born Ettie was old enough to have a nurse of her own.

But, though Georgina herself, very bustling and self-important out of school hours, chattered to anyone who had

time to listen, and, indeed, to many who had no such time, about her prowess at the piano and of how Miss Paradise was making her do sums in an exercise book and not on a slate as Mamma had done, Mary had nothing at all to say about Georgina.

When she came in to dinner, Miss Martin would ask :

“ And how did little Georgina get on to-day ? ”

But Mary would never answer more than : “ Quite nicely,” or, if questioned as to detail : “ She can play ‘ The Merry Peasant ’ by heart now.” And Miss Martin would feel a little snubbed, though her question had arisen from kind-heartedness and not out of curiosity.

When she came to think it over, Lena began to realise that Mary’s silence was due less to a proper reserve than to a pleasant indifference to her work. She had so lately been a schoolgirl, with the schoolgirl’s habit of separating work and play, that she carried the same attitude of mind with her now that she was the director and not the directed at lesson-time.

The result of this shutting off of one part of her life from the other was by no means unsatisfactory so far as the Rectory was concerned. Madeline expressed herself as more than satisfied with Georgina’s immediate improvement in manners and temper. When the child celebrated her ninth birthday early in April by playing three of the *Kinderstücke* without one false note, and on the grand piano in the drawing-room, the Rector was almost as pleased with the performance as Georgina was herself. He was, Madeline thought, perhaps a little too much inclined to give most of the credit of this display of talent to little Miss Paradise. Mrs. Bartram, who had brought the Squire to hear his god-daughter perform, noticed that. She was still a lazy woman, but time, which had relieved her of the cares of a large nursery, had allowed her leisure for the exercise of a rather more actively censorious spirit than was to be expected from so comfortably stout and slow-moving a person.

“ I wonder, George,” she had remarked placidly to the

Squire as they drove back to Queen's Beaton Place after tea, "whether Mr. Malory would have praised our dear old Quiggs so much for little Georgina's playing if she had been her teacher, instead of that extremely pretty girl with the outlandish name. Paradise. It sounds like a dancer—a French dancer. Mademoiselle Paradise. She has a foreign look too—so dark and thin. And I thought there was a flounce too many on that magenta dress she wore. The colour, too—these Parisian shades are not quite suitable for a young woman in her position. Don't you feel with me about it, George?"

"Eh, what?" said the Squire, who had long accustomed himself to letting his Bertha ramble on, especially when returning from one of the rare tea-parties to which she inveigled him. "The little gel's dress. Not at all. Very gay and pretty, I thought it. And I liked that song she sang. 'The Mocking Bird.' Just like a bird—very clever, I thought it—very clever and pretty indeed."

"All gentlemen are alike," pronounced Mrs. Bartram with the amiable deliberation that characterised most of her utterances. "A pretty face blinds them to any fault."

"Come, come, Bertha." The Squire roused himself at this. "What fault was there to find? The young woman is as quiet and modest a girl as you can wish to see. I don't blame Malory for speaking a few kind words to her. She's got that young god-daughter of mine into fine fettle. And a pair of bright eyes is not a crime, any more than a sweet singing voice is."

"Well," said Mrs. Bartram with finality, "all I can say is, that it is far better for a governess to be plain and quiet-looking and not too young."

One afternoon, however, Mary volunteered one glimpse of her working hours.

"I had two pupils this morning, Aunt Lena," she said, as they walked briskly through a succession of April

showers towards the chestnut avenue by the Malquoits river.

"Who was the second?" Lena asked, pleased at this offered confidence.

"Ettie came in from the nursery and said, 'Ettie is Miss Paradise A, B, C.' That means she likes me and wants to learn her alphabet."

"I'm glad you can interpret Ettie's speeches so well," said Lena. "Did you teach her the alphabet?"

"Georgina was doing her free-hand drawing copy, so I let Ettie stay. She sat on a chair at a table. We put the big atlas and a cushion on it to make it high enough. And she said A, B, C, D after me quite prettily."

"Did she remember any of it?"

"Only as far as E. But she made a joke."

"Ettie made a joke?"

"Yes, Aunt Lena. When she came to U, she said, 'Me' and laughed. I think she is a very clever little girl."

Lena was delighted, less by Ettie's joke than by the communicativeness it had aroused in Mary, and the suggestion that she had begun to discover signs of a vocation. It was, she felt, hopeless to condemn so rare a creature as Mary to the schoolroom unless she could make some kind of happiness for herself there. If she could not, Lena felt uncertain of an alternative. Her gifts, though charming, were not of the kind that could carry her into any of the few careers open to a gently nurtured girl, and, though so lovely a face must always attract admiration, it was difficult to see where in the Beaton's a husband good enough for Mary could be found. Who among its eligible young men would be ready to marry Miss Quibell's niece, with sixty pounds a year of her own, and the prospect of as much again when her aunt died, for her sole dowry?

It was, thought Lena, a misfortune to be so attractive and so poor. A less beautiful, less sensitive and gentle creature might push herself into success. But Mary, silent and yielding and without any marked enthusiasm, any

pronounced tastes, was the last person to fight her way in the world. There was, of course, the incident of the letter Christina had never succeeded in reading. There Mary had shown a will of her own and a way of her own as well. The child was in many ways a puzzle. She seemed happy enough ; her presence in the house was a real pleasure to Christina and herself ; but that pleasure was unaccountably shot through with a never quite forgotten anxiety.

2

Ettie, whose grasp of the alphabet strengthened letter by letter, though she remained weak on sequence, was one of the most determined persons in Queen's Beaton. For the first eighteen months of her life her will-power had developed at the expense of her affection. Ettie's family and friends all enjoyed an equal place in her esteem. They formed a body of adoring and obedient slaves, and she knew before she could walk unaided that a sign of preference bestowed on one of them would obtain her almost any indulgence, and throw the others into paroxysms of competition. But with the advent of the new being, the grown-up who seemed unaccountably to be more concerned with Ettie's slave Georgina than with Ettie herself, Ettie's attitude to life underwent a change.

What exactly was happening to her Ettie was, by reason of her youth, unable to say, but she felt it with utmost keenness. Life, which hitherto had presented an agreeable succession of meals and amusements, disturbed at rare intervals by some frustration of which as a rule she was able, either by blandishment or with violence, to make short work ; life, which had centred in her nurseries and had on the whole furnished no companionship quite so satisfactory as Nurse's, now began to veer and wobble in a most unnerving way. Grown-up persons, till now all uniformly acceptable, appeared to vary in attractiveness. Nurse was no longer the only person on whose lap Ettie would remain

for five consecutive minutes. Mamma's lap was softer ; the buttons with which Ettie played when sitting on those silk- or velvet-covered knees varied in colour and design, and in the always delusive promise of edibility, to a greater extent than the bone ones on Nurse's nankeen bodice. For one vehement week Ettie was happy nowhere but on Mamma's lap. But that meant spending more time than usual in the drawing-room, and seeing strange, unfamiliar faces. Ettie discovered that any face she was not in the habit of seeing was not, as she had hitherto believed, amusing, but so repulsive that she could not bear to look at it. When a strange face appeared, Ettie would now bury her face on Mamma's shoulder and, if any attempt were made to get her to look up and say " Dee do " like a good little girl, she would scream until she forced a small and glittering tear from each tightly closed blue eye.

" They always do go through a shy phase," Nurse would explain, when sent for to take Ettie back to the nursery. " It'll wear off when she gets her back teeth through."

Ettie's back teeth gave her the trouble always associated with the arrival of these transitory improvements in the infant frame, and, while that anguish lasted, Papa assumed human attributes and displaced both Nurse and Mamma as the giver of consolation. The last back tooth of the ~~moment~~ being safely cut, Ettie found no further use for Papa, and was wavering between one of the housemaids and someone rather like a man whom she had noticed occasionally in the garden, when it was borne in upon her that Georgina's satellite had a peculiarly delicious smell. This seemed to come from the handkerchief into which, one afternoon, she had made something she called a mouse. A mouse was soft and round and white, with two little flaps, one at each end, and it came out of a pocket in a brown skirt trimmed with black velvet ribbon, and smelt like the little dark flowers Mamma sometimes brought into the nursery. " Vilits," Nurse called them.

Ettie who by this time was able to communicate with

Nurse though nobody else was at all good at understanding her voluble conversation, enquired what it was that kept this agreeable mouse-maker in such close association with Georgina.

"They do lessons in the schoolroom," said Nurse. "That's what they do."

"Ot's lessons?" demanded Ettie.

"A, B, C and one, two, three," said Nurse.

This answer confirmed Ettie in her desire to resume her wonted intimacy with Georgina, recently impaired by her stepsister's habit of retiring to another room at hours when she might be just as well playing in the nursery. Besides, "A, B, C; one, two, three" sounded very much like an entrancing speech Georgina had made not long ago, a speech that Nurse had overheard, with sensational consequence.

"For shame, Georgina," Nurse had said. "Repeating things like that. You get it from that Clara, I'll be bound."

That Clara was the housemaid who had caught Ettie's fleeting preference just before her teeth became troublesome. Ettie remembered now. Clara had said it, and Georgina had repeated it. It was a delightful sound:

"VUN—TOOO—SREE;
DADDA—GOTTA—FLEA."

observed Ettie dispassionately, and paused to see what Nurse would make of that.

Nurse's response was most satisfying.

"There now," she said, addressing the rocking-horse, Ettie noticed, "the innocent child has got hold of it. Ettie, you're not to say that. Do you hear me?"

"Dadda gotta *free*," said Ettie, just to show that she liked the composition irrespective of any meaning its syllables might convey to ears less pure than hers.

"If you say that again, I'll send you to the schoolroom to be taught proper."

Nurse was not used to dealing with intelligence in so rapid a process of development as Ettie's. She was a comparatively young woman, who specialised in taking babies "from the month" and generally moved on to some other weanling when her charges began to walk and talk. She came from Kensington, and gave herself airs with the other servants; but Madeleine trusted her, and was young enough to feel a little proud of having a nurse with London experience.

Ettie received the threat with rapture.

"Ettie go kool r-room," she gurgled, trilling the r with a display of virtuosity over this newly acquired accomplishment. "Kool r-r-r-room," she repeated, and, the nursery door being open, she trotted off to beat with flat hands on the lower panels of the door on the other side of the passage, making her first demand for the privileges of literacy somewhere about the same time as the equally determined if riper minds of Barbara Bodichon and Emily Davies were planning their larger assault on the gates of learning.

For three weeks Ettie knew one passion only. "Ettie is Miss Palla-r-wice," she repeated with a frequency that was none the less annoying that her proclamation was occasionally replaced by the complementary statement, "Ettie *not* Nurse," or "Ettie not Mamma."

Her attendance in the schoolroom was regular and enthusiastic, her exits from it stormy and protesting. When Nurse came to take her out for her morning airing at ten o'clock, Ettie was always deep in study, from which she refused to be cajoled. She mastered the alphabet, and learned to dissociate *one, two, three* from that Clara's rhyming sequence. She would count her own fat fingers right up to *ten*, pinching the tip of each one as she numbered them in the fashion adopted by Nurse and Mamma when prefacing the ritual of "This little pig went to market."

Mamma was so pleased with this accomplishment, and with Ettie's complete recovery from the attacks of shyness

that had made her such difficult company in the drawing-room, that she forgot to be jealous of Miss Paradise, and would herself visit the freshly bathed and curled pupil in the schoolroom every morning. She even issued invitations to Mary for nursery tea on several wet afternoons.

Ettie marked her second birthday by taking up art. It was two days before she learnt to hold her pencil in the right hand ; but this refinement of technique made very little difference to her spirited executions of works that looked, as Papa observed when called upon to admire them, as though the kitten had been playing with a ball of wool.

But A, B, C ; one, two three, or drawing, all learning and all pleasure centred round the person who invented these delectable amusements. Ettie drew and counted to Miss Paradise's glory alone, forsaking all other allegiance.

The affair, publicly recognised and approved, was running a smooth enough course when circumstances, precipitated by Ettie's own yielding to an even more consuming passion, removed Miss Paradise from her life for ever.

Of all the toys in her nursery, Ettie, after the manner of her sex and age, preferred a woolly lamb, knitted and stuffed for her, while she was yet in the cradle, by Miss Martin, who had herself invented this class of safe and comfortable toy.

The object was called a lamb by courtesy and because it was executed in thick white wool. It had a sausage-shaped body ; a tail that came in useful to carry it by ; a head with ears but no mouth, and a nose that had position without form. Two boot-buttons set close together on its brow lent malevolence to its squint. An internal organ gave out an impressive bleat when the construction was clutched amidships. Ettie had discovered that, if she put the lamb on the floor and jumped on it, it would bleat loud enough to frighten the nursery cat. The lamb slept on her pillow ; sat with her behind the bar of her high chair at table, and

was strapped with her into the wide, tall-handled perambulator in which she rode when taking the air. The first crisp woolliness of its coat had been relaxed by the periodic washings to which it was subject, and these operations had impaired its symmetry without quenching its voice. It was called "Blam," and it was a great trial to Nurse.

One fine morning towards the end of May, Ettie had been torn from the unsupervised drawing she was making on the fly-leaf of *The Observing Eye* and, pacified by the restoration of Blam, who had been sequestered for two days' washing and drying, was taken for her usual walk. It had been Nurse's custom for some weeks past to push the wide perambulator down Queen Street and to halt for the exchange of prolonged greetings with the lodge-keeper at the white gate that admitted traffic to the carriage road through the park.

The right of way along the lower drive had by custom grown to include the freedom of the grass and bracken-covered land that separated the roadway from the river, and this made a safe and level playground for a child to run on. Once inside the gate, Ettie was released from her perambulator and allowed to frisk on the grass and to peer at the rabbits that popped in and out of the bracken, while Nurse, in the shelter of one of the oak-trees that studded the sward between the gate and the opening of the chestnut avenue quarter of a mile away, sat on the floor of the perambulator just over its front wheel and sewed, keeping an eye on the child.

On this particular morning, Nurse had established herself in full view of the lodge. The lodge-keeper's brother, said to be valet to high families in London, had come down to the country for a holiday, and Nurse fully intended to have a few words with him about the great world before she took Ettie home for dinner. The gentleman himself had been invisible as she came through the gates but the lodge-keeper's wife had assured her that he would be returning from the town very shortly.

So Nurse sat and sewed and watched the lodge windows, and gave absent-minded replies to Ettie when she ran up to her knee, and explained that Blam was now a rabbit in a hole of his own, with other news of a like nature. Nurse said, "Yes, Ettie," and "That's a good girl"; and decided to refuse a situation she had been offered that morning by post and to stay on at the Rectory until the autumn.

Presently she saw Miss Paradise, with Georgina, coming in through the gates. They often came this way for their walk. Nurse noticed that the ribands in Miss Paradise's leg-horn hat were of the same rose pink as the flowers that sprigged her white cotton dress. An extravagant way for a governess to get herself up that was, thought Nurse, but there, it was no business of hers. Then she saw that Ettie had seen them too, and was trotting to meet them, dragging Blam behind her by the tail. "Drat," thought Nurse, "I shall have to wash that woolly mess all over again if the child gets in the roadway. I daresay the grass stains won't matter." But she did not rise from the low foot of the perambulator to pursue her charge. The child was perfectly safe, and Nurse preferred to keep her seat when Miss Paradise was about, just to mark the relative equality of their positions.

When they came up to the perambulator, Nurse saw that Ettie was carrying Blam in her arms again, and approved the exertion of Miss Paradise's authority in this way.

"Oh, Nurse," said Georgina, "we are going to take Ettie for a little walk all by ourselves, and bring her back to you when it's time for you to go in, if you will give your consent."

Nurse gave her consent. She had seen the lodge-keeper's brother-in-law look out of the window of the sitting-room. She could allow herself a good twenty minutes before it was time to start back to the Rectory.

"We'll put Blam to sleep in the perambulator while Ettie walks with Miss Paradise," she suggested.

But Ettie wanted Blam and Miss Paradise all to herself,

and indicated Georgina as a candidate for a seat in the perambulator, which was not at all what Nurse intended. Matters were finally settled by leaving the perambulator unoccupied, except in so far as Nurse's seat over the wheel could be called occupation, and by putting Georgina into a pair of red woollen reins with bells on them, thus converting her into a horse for Miss Paradise to drive, while Ettie, with Blam in her arms, pranced between them in an enjoyable but inconvenient manner. Nurse watched them until a turn in the drive hid them from sight, and observed that the Londoner had had the sense to wait for their disappearance before emerging, with a rather over-studied air of nonchalance, from the lodge.

Ettie's day was made. She chirruped as she ran ; the steed Georgina before ; the divinity Miss Paradise behind ; Blam giving out a muffled squeak at every other step as she hugged him in her joy.

The road dipped at the turn, running downhill for a matter of fifty yards or so to the corner, where it was joined by the private drive that zig-zagged up the rise of the park to the main entrance of the Castle, a mile away on the crest of the hill. As they reached the tongue of level grass that filled the angle where the two roads met, Georgina, now in the full tide of equine impersonation, decided to go to grass. Turning from the roadway with a sudden leap, she stumbled over the low wire hoops that protected the turf's edge. She fell forward on all fours, and began to graze at once, ignoring Ettie, who had fallen on her back. Mary almost stumbled too as the knitted reins tightened in her hold, but, recovering her balance as her foot caught in the wire, she released herself and joined the laughing children on the turf.

"We're on the wrong side of the road, Georgina," she said.

"I'm a horse," mumbled Georgina ; "it doesn't matter where I go. Ettie is a lady riding me, and Blam is her baby. Would it be nice for me to be the ass and Ettie to be the

Virgin Mary, and Blam to be the little Lord Jesus, do you think, Miss Paradise? You could be Joseph, and lead us all back to the perambulator for the manger."

"I think it would take too long," said Mary. "You had better get up, Georgina. I don't think eating grass is very good for you."

Georgina unseated her rider and scrambled to her feet, getting involved in the reins as she did so. It was while Mary was engaged in helping Georgina to disentangle herself that Ettie became aware of a vision that deprived her of utterance. A horse, a real horse, was coming down the drive, harnessed to a high dog-cart. The spokes of the varnished wheels glittered in the sunlight like revolving stars; the silver-mounted harness sparkled and jingled with every movement of the trotting horse. A groom so small that Ettie formed an instant project of attracting his attention with a view to inviting him to play with her, sat in the back of the cart, his arms folded very near his chin. Ettie watched the groom with rapture till the last hairpin bend of the drive brought the other occupant of the dog-cart into the centre of her field of vision. So splendid a being had never dawned on her sight before. August, Olympian in a white and shining hat and driving-coat of buff-coloured box-cloth, he held reins and whip together in gloved hands, and rose above the tall suns that were the wheels of his car in a majesty that Ettie accepted as the assertion of his claim on her immediate and unsparing devotion. But, though he had certainly seen her, this resplendent presence was not paying her any attention. His blue eyes were fixed either on the horse Georgina, or on Miss Paradise, who stood behind it. For a moment it seemed to Ettie that the god might give utterance to speech. Then he looked away at his reins; at the road; he became concerned with driving round the sharp corner where they stood. In another moment he would be past them, gone on those bright revolving wheels.

It was more than Ettie could bear. Miss Paradise was

Ks

forgotten ; Georgina was not. The world held no one but Ettie and this marvel. With the complete abandonment of infancy, Ettie stepped forward to the very tip of the tongue of grass on which they stood and flung her oblation before the chariot of this god. Blam fell noiselessly in a white heap under the grey horse's hoofs. His last bleat shrilled upwards as his squeaker was stilled for ever by the weight of the hoof that descended on him. There was a plunging and a shout and a gritting of sand as the driver pulled his horse to a standstill. The groom stepped down from his perch and rushed to the horse's head.

Ettie heard Georgina begin to cry. She felt herself seized by Miss Paradise. She was not in the least alarmed, nor did she know one pang for the crushed and dusty ruin in the roadway—the woollen remnant of Blam. She had brought her god to earth.

"Genkleman," said Ettie, leaning forward in Miss Paradise's slim and trembling arms.

3

"Of course," said Madeleine, "I couldn't refuse to see him. Besides, Waites showed him into the drawing-room at once, and I was there. You know, Lena, he is charming. More so even than he was three years ago. He was so frank about it, too, without saying *anything* that could distress me. He made me feel that we shared a common sorrow."

"That was very clever of Mr. Towyn," said Lena. "Shall you be sharing it often?"

"Lena, you are not being serious. As a matter of fact, he did say something about coming again—to see Ettie."

"To see Ettie?"

"Yes. You see, he said he was really calling on Ettie because of Blam. Oh, you did not know—didn't your Mary tell you about Blam?"

"About Blam—and Mr. Towyn? I don't follow you at all, Madeleine."

"How extremely odd," said Madeleine. "Perhaps she didn't realise it *was* Mr. Towyn at the time. Still, I should have thought she must have told you they were nearly run over in the park, and that Blam was trampled to pieces by the horse. That's what gave him the excuse."

"You mean that Mr. Towyn called on you because he had nearly run over Mary and Georgina?"

"It wasn't exactly that, Lena. His horse shied at Blam, and really, although dear Miss Martin made it, I don't wonder. It looked most peculiar, especially when Ettie carried it upside down. Mr. Towyn telegraphed to London, to the Baker Street Bazaar, for a toy lamb, and sent his groom over to meet the train it came down by yesterday. He brought it with him this morning. He asked to be allowed to give it to Ettie herself, and to see Georgina, who had been frightened. He had brought a box of *dragées* for her. So I took him up to the schoolroom. Ettie was doing what she calls her drawing when he came in. She generally takes no notice of anyone when she is doing that. But she recognised Mr. Towyn at once. He was delighted. He says that it is the greatest compliment a man can receive, to be recognised and welcomed by a child of that age. She wouldn't look at the new lamb, she was so taken up with Mr. Towyn. And it is such a handsome toy, Lena, on a green wooden stand with yellow wheels, with a bell round its neck tied with a pink riband."

"Like a cat," said Lena, who was, Madeleine couldn't help feeling, making too light of the really important event that had just happened.

"You shall see it for yourself. It makes quite a bright spot in the nursery, Nurse has put it in the middle of the mantelpiece. She is very proud of it."

"Did he call on Nurse as well as on you and Ettie and Georgina?"

"No, Lena, Nurse had nothing to do with it. The

children were with your Miss Mary when it happened. He spoke very nicely to her, I thought, this morning. He asked her after her health—and said he hoped she had forgiven him for the fright he must have caused her.”

Lena did not ask how Mary had replied to this apparently perfunctory courtesy. She listened to the rest of Madeleine's exhaustive account of all Mr. Towyn had said and done and looked, and of how he had promised Ettie that he would come again soon, and, as she listened, half her attention wandered. Mary had told her nothing. And yet the incident must have been sufficiently exciting and even alarming enough to make any normal girl want to talk about it. And it was now a week since it had happened. She cast her mind over the events of the past few days in the narrow circle of the house and library. Had she or Christie been full of some concern of business that day, too full of it to give Mary an opportunity for speaking? There was the day when Matilda had scalded her hand, but that was on Tuesday of last week, two days before the encounter in the park. They had, of course, fallen out of the habit of asking Mary how her morning's work had prospered. She had been at the Rectory for over five months now, and her reticence had long ceased to occasion any remark. Besides, Madeleine's almost daily calls supplied them with all the news they could desire. But they had seen nothing of Madeleine for some days. She had been busy opening a bazaar at Beaton Abbot's and giving a large dinner-party, and preparing for the Cottage Garden Flower Show, of which she was the president, and had not had time to come up and see Lena.

But—and here Lena faced a more serious aspect of the intangible situation—if Mary had told, if Georgina or Nurse had told, of the accident when it happened, Madeleine would certainly have found time to communicate with Lena about it.

“Weren't you very alarmed when you first heard of the accident?” she asked.

Madeleine laughed. “Do you know,” she said, “I was

too busy to pay much attention to it. It was the day of the bazaar, and I didn't see your little Mary until the next morning, when I went into the schoolroom for a minute. She did tell me that Ettie had thrown her Blam at a horse in the park, and that the thing was too crushed and dirty to bring home again. But I didn't realise that it was James Towyn's horse—and of course your Mary didn't either. Nurse seems to know nothing about it. They had taken Ettie for a walk. All Nurse feels is that she will not have to wash Blam any more. She never liked doing it. Mr. Towyn was so funny about Blam, Lena. He says that his groom picked up the remains and hid them in the back of the dog-cart, and that his terrier found it when they got back to the stables and worried it to bits."

The incident had obviously no importance to Madeleine so great as that attending to the visit of James Towyn.

"Ettie has asked him to tea," she went on. "He said he would come if it were nursery tea and if all three of his victims would eat the buns of peace with him. So amusing! And so charming of him to take all the blame for his horse being frightened on himself. Most men would have been angry with the child."

Lena forbore to remark that they did not know exactly how the incident had arisen. Madeleine was past caring. She talked a little longer, and took her departure, after pointing out that next Thursday her nursery would be the only room in Queen's Beaton where anyone from the Castle had ever drunk tea.

"Mary," said Lena that evening, as they sat sewing by the last light of sunset in the parlour window while Miss Martin in the dining-room went through the household accounts with Matilda, "why did you not tell us about the accident to Ettie's woolly lamb last Thursday?"

The girl looked up from her needlework: a blush stained her cheeks.

"I did not like to say anything. I thought it might grieve

Miss Martin to learn that the lamb she had knitted was dead," she answered.

Lena was nonplussed. Everybody in the affair seemed to give it a different value. Madeleine was excited because she had met James Towyn again ; Nurse was pleased at the release from a tiresome piece of extra work ; and now Mary was treating the situation with tact, making a toy tragedy out of it.

" You didn't tell me either that you were asked to tea in the nursery on Thursday," she went on.

Mary's eyes filled with tears. Lena felt as though she were finding fault with an angel.

" I am so sorry, Aunt Lena," she answered. " I quite forgot to tell you. And I forgot to tell you that Mrs. Malory wants me to go back every afternoon now to give Georgina her piano lessons and schoolroom tea. The schoolroom is over the study, you know, and it disturbs Mr. Malory in the morning to hear pieces when he is writing his sermons. He doesn't mind Georgina's scales when she is practising, but the tunes interfere with his thoughts. I said I was sure you would not mind. I think Mrs. Malory was to ask you about it when she next saw you."

" Of course I don't mind, Mary," said Lena. " We shall have plenty of time for our long walks in the evenings now."

Mary had, unconsciously, turned the tables. Mrs. Mallory had said nothing about the afternoon music lesson. She, too, had forgotten what she might have been supposed to regard as a matter of importance.

" I seem to be getting very critical and old-maidish," thought Lena. But even the wise expedient of trying to blame herself for what seemed unsatisfactory in the conduct of other people did not serve to set her mind at rest.

4

*" Oh—oh, how can a poor gipsy-maiden like me
Ever hope the proud bride of a noble to be ? "*

sang Mary. The light clear voice floated out through the open lattice of the parlour and mingled with the shrilling of the garden birds.

Miss Martin, already dressed for breakfast, knocked at Miss Quibell's door.

"Come in," called Lena. "Good morning, Christie! What a lovely day!"

Miss Martin crossed the bedroom and stood by the open window.

"Mary seems to have a new song," she observed. "I wonder if she got it at Mason's? It does not seem to be an improvement on Schubert."

"It may be one of those Madeleine bought in London before her marriage," said Lena, adjusting the brooch that fastened her collar. "She has given up singing now, and I know she said she would lend Mary some songs."

"Very spirited accompaniment," said Miss Martin as, to a gallop of chords, the song came to an end with the declaration:

"I'll love thee for EVER, mine own gipsy maid."

"I think it must be a duet."

Miss Martin judged a song by its words alone. Music to her was entirely the handmaid of verse.

"She said something about singing a duet with Mrs. Macfarlane at the Flower Show concert. Perhaps she has been trying out both parts to see which suits her best."

"Good morning, Aunt Christie." Mary's voice called up from the garden. "I'm cutting some roses for the breakfast-table."

Ever since Lena had told her of Mary's reason for keeping silence about the accident to Blam, Miss Martin had taken the girl to her heart without any further reserve. She

was now Aunt Christie, and was admitted to the secret of the crewel work Christmas presents Georgina was already preparing for her parents under Mary's direction during the hour marked "Needlework" on her timetable.

"Come to the window, Lena," said Miss Martin softly, "and look at the child."

Lena went and stood by her friend. They looked together into the garden. Mary stood on the flagged path by the border now tall with lilies and the spires of larkspur. The sun burnished her smooth chestnut hair, and made the plaits over each ear, that looked too heavy for the little head, seem almost golden. Against the lilac cotton of her dress the damask roses in her hand glowed with a crimson that might well have been the source from which the faint rose of her lips took its fragrant life. Accustomed as she was by now to the girl's fresh beauty, Lena was astonished at its morning radiance. Her eyes, that varied in colour, being sometimes grey, sometimes dark with excitement, shone with a more starry gleam than Lena had ever noticed in them before.

She stood on tiptoe to cut a rose from the highest spray of the rose-tree. The garden scissors stretched on her fingers sparkled, a silvery cross in the sunlight. She swayed lightly on her feet to balance herself as her wide skirt blew about her, moved by the summer breeze. She was so light, so clear, she might have been part of a good dream, a bubble of the fancy that would break and vanish at the call of a bird or the brushing of a may-fly's wing.

As she raised her face to answer Lena's call, some of the air, some inner glow (Lena could not give the cause a name), touched her face to such a startling loveliness that the two women, seeing it, looked at one another in a silent wonder.

"The air of Queen's Beaton suits our Mary," said Miss Martin.

"She certainly looks very well this morning," Lena agreed.

"Very happy, too."

"Yes," said Lena, "very happy, too."

But a shadow seemed to fall across the morning light as she spoke.

CHAPTER V

FLOWER SHOW

I

The Queen's Beaton Cottage Garden Flower Show took place on the last Saturday of June or the first Saturday in July, according to the incidence of Whitsuntide. There was a saying in Beatons to the effect that a month from Whitsun was the roses high-day, a horticultural adage that had to be overlooked in the years when Whitsun-Day fell early. The Squire gave a prize for the garden that showed the greatest variety of flowers ; Mrs. Bartram gave one for the finest roses, the rose being a good grower in the Beaton soil ; while the Rectory supplied the reward offered for neatness and originality in cottage gardening. This year Madeleine, at Lena's suggestion, had added a fourth prize for the best bouquet of wild flowers collected and arranged by a child under twelve years of age. Madeleine and Mrs. Bartram were the judges. The open-air concert that followed the presentation of the prizes was to be held in the Rectory garden, the function taking place there or at Queen's Beaton Place in alternate years. The Vicar's wife from Beaton Clarence was coming on to present the prizes, and Mrs. MacFarlane was organising the concert. A tent in the field at the bottom of the garden would shelter the tea-tables, where the urns from Mr. Dobb's the confectioner's catering department could steam and hiss among the plates of buns and gingerbread provided by the house of Dobbs for the occasion.

Madeleine was very much concerned over her duties. She would have to give a private tea-party of her own, and

she felt a little anxious lest she should fail to invite all the people who could not be expected to mingle with the throng in the tent to join her in the dining-room. Last year Mrs. Bartram had been the hostess, and the year before as well, because Madeleine had still been in bed after Ettie's birth and could not have the Flower Show party at the Rectory.

"Do you think I ought to ask the Thomsons in, or would they be happier in the tent?" was the kind of question she put to Lena every time she saw her during the week before the show. Nor were her problems confined to the lower end of the social ladder.

"James Towyn wants to come, Lena. He called on me yesterday. I was out when he came, so he had tea in the schoolroom and sent a message by Georgina. She said he said he was affronted because I had not invited him to be one of the judges. But, of course, that was only his way of teasing me. I am sure Lady Gervaise would put a stop to his taking any public part in Queen's Beaton life. It is difficult. What am I to do about it?"

"I should do nothing. He was probably joking, as you suggest. It would be a mistake to invite him to judge the gardens, but there can be no reason why, as he comes to your house so often, he should not do so with others next Saturday."

The next day Madeleine announced that she had taken Lena's advice and had invited Mr. Towyn to the concert.

"I did not advise you to do that. I advised you to do nothing, Madeleine, but I do not think you have done wrong. I suppose Mr. Malory approves."

"Richard! Oh, yes, he was very much amused by Georgina's letter."

"Georgina's."

"Yes. Didn't I tell you? Georgina wrote to him all by herself, and signed it 'Georgina and Ettie.' I had to let it go. I just enclosed it in a little note saying I was their intermediary."

Lena thought that Madeleine was being a trifle disingenuous, and then reminded herself that young Mrs. Malory's conduct and notions were no longer subject to her criticism. Madeleine was being rather silly about the young man, and the young man was evidently finding it amusing to encourage her. It could not go on much longer. Mr. Towyn was unlikely to spend more than a few weeks at the Castle, and when Colonel Seymour came down to the Abbey, and rode over to see his daughter and granddaughter every day, common sense and filial affection would combine to make Madeleine avoid any occasion for arousing her father's temper. The Colonel had grown extremely irritable since both his daughters had married and left him. He was not, so Madeleine said, in the best of health. There was an idea that he might give up his work at the War Office in November and go off to India to visit Genevieve for a year. Lena was astonished and a little rueful to discover how completely indifferent she was to the news. She was sorry to hear that he was out of health. But it was to her incredible and also saddening to find that a man whom, if but for a moment, she had felt she might marry, had ceased to interest her as completely as if he had never existed. What was this mystery in human relationship that kept the memory of one frustrated union a living anguish that could defeat and obliterate all offered substitutes for that one foregone completion? Why should the memory of a few weeks' expectation of happiness almost twenty years ago be more potent than that of a friendly kindness which had extended over three years, and from which she herself had withdrawn so recently and with such genuine regret? It was, she supposed, some alchemy of youth that rendered the heart submissive, like an etcher's plate, to the acid in which it worked, and left it hardened against any later impressions. It was this reception of an indelible image that drove the young to the extremities of tragic love. There was the other tragedy, less spectacular but not less profound, of the heart too strong to break under disappointment, too

tenacious to relinquish its desire. Happy the natures that, like Genevieve's, could recover and forget and be compensated. Happier, possibly, those self-forgetful lives which, like Christina Martin's, could find their complete emotional fulfilment in family ties and in the deep and placid satisfaction of such a friendship as theirs. Happiest of all those simple and fortunate hearts that know one love only, and see it prosper and bloom in an equal and harmonious marriage, and in the birth and gradual blooming of the children in whom that love shows its unchanging vitality and power.

2

Mary went off at two o'clock to go through her duets with Mrs. MacFarlane for the last time. They had decided on selections from Moore's Irish Melodies arranged for two voices. Neither Lena nor Miss Martin had heard the song about the gipsy and the nobleman a second time, nor did they, in the press of their occupations, remember to ask her about its origin. Christina, who was an enthusiastic and successful gardener, had been asked to join the Committee for judging the gardens. Having spent a long morning driving through the town and its outskirts with Madeleine and Mrs. Bartram, she was resting from the fatigues of office until four o'clock, when she was to join Lena to go down to the Rectory for the concert.

Lena, who had had the library and emporium on her hands all the morning, was sewing fresh lawn ruffles into the sleeves of her own dress when Mary put her head in at the door for a moment to say, "Good-bye, dear Aunt Lena. I am late."

So she had not seen what the girl was wearing, and it was not until she arrived at the Rectory that she caught sight of the magenta glow of Mary's figure, moving like the bell of a fuchsia-flower among the sober grey silks and white muslins of the other ladies in the garden.

She remembered in a flash how she had seen Mary changing the cherry-coloured riband of her leghorn hat for a wide one of black velvet.

"For the concert, Aunt Lena," Mary had volunteered, and Lena had taken it for granted that the girl would wear a white Swiss muslin dress that had already appeared on several hot Sundays. Lena had completely forgotten the petunia-coloured taffeta Mary had only worn once before—for Georgina's birthday party. The dress, though simple in design, with long leg-of-mutton sleeves and a little cape on the shoulders, was of an elegance that justified Mary's own account of it. It represented the sum of all her Christmas gifts and pocket-money, spent in Paris at the same time as she had bought the perfume-casket which Miss Martin never used or spoke of. It was, Mary said, a model gown, and had fitted her, being rather too small, as model gowns are apt to be, for the figures of most ladies. A few weeks in the showroom and shop-window had brought its price down to Mary's extreme limit. She had arrived in London penniless, as Mr. Malory had discovered, with the lovely dress passed safely through the Customs as worn clothing, lying in the top tray of her black, hair-covered trunk.

Miss Christina had teased her a little about it, asking where in Queen's Beaton she expected to display such finery? Lena had advanced her the sum that would be due to her from their joint income on Lady Day; and there, for the time, the matter rested.

The day of the Flower Show was overcast and cold for July, and Lena herself had decided to substitute her plum-coloured cashmere gown for the grey grenadine she would otherwise have worn. So there was some excuse for Mary's choice of a dress that put every other garment worn at the party in the shade. Madeleine, in canary yellow organdie, looked pinched and chilly, as, indeed, she felt, when she passed anywhere near Mary's warm radiance, and little Mrs. MacFarlane, in a rather childish blue barege with

short sleeves, the work of the Queen's Beaton dressmaker, presented the absolute norm of out-modedness that is achieved when an inexperienced hand copies the day before yesterday's fashion.

When Mary and her companion came out from the drawing-room windows together to sing from the terrace that served as a platform for the concert, the audience seated in chairs on the lawn below paid little attention to *The Harp that once through Tara's Halls*, and only hushed its whispers to listen to *The Last Rose of Summer*, so great was the contrast the appearance of the singers presented.

Lena was glad when the Irish Melodies were over and the Rector emerged to give "John Peel" and "Robin Adair," his staple contribution to every lay entertainment in the parish. An encore was invariably demanded and given whenever the Rector sang to a mixed audience of all his parishioners. With *When I was a farmer, a farmer's boy*, the afternoon's ice became broken for good, and class barriers were abolished for the rest of the afternoon by the participation of the whole audience in the quacking and clucking and grunting of the chorus to that heartiest of bucolic ditties. An element of excitement was introduced by the certainty that the Rector would finally think of some vociferous beast or bird not usually included in the list of a farmer's cares, and would himself squeak or whistle as loud as any yokel when the time for his improvisation came. Lena was waiting with some amusement to see what Christie, who, though no singer, always joined most heartily in this part of any entertainment, would make of the owl, whose too-whoosings were issuing from the Rector's throat, when she saw that a tall young man had taken up his place behind Madeleine's chair on the opposite side of the semi-circle from her own. The chorus of owls, though well sustained from the back benches, grew slight in volume and poor in quality so far as the front rows were concerned. Even the Squire, who considered himself in honour bound

to lead the responses on these occasions, uttered few and faint too-whoos as he became aware of this late-comer. Madeleine, having turned to greet her guest, settled back in her chair visibly triumphant, while Mr. Towyn, his tall hat tilted slightly over one eye, fixed an apparently serious attention on the Rector.

"The Farmer's Boy" was succeeded by "The Maiden's Prayer," rendered by one of the solicitor's daughters, Miss Florence Wharton, who contrived to add an element of romance to the religious nature of her performance by allowing young Jones from the brewery to turn over the leaves of her music. The spread chords tinkled across the garden with the thin and flattened sound a house-piano will give forth when dragged into the open air, and it was possibly with the conscious intention of enlivening the performance that young Jones turned over two leaves at a time, thus bringing the fair pianist to a momentary pause. While it lasted, Mr. Towyn was introduced to one or two of Mrs. Malory's immediate neighbours. Lena watched him, saw the grace of his carriage, the curling of his fair hair, as, hand to heart, he bowed to each lady who was named. He had—she could not refuse the admission—a charm, a disarming melancholy, an air of unconscious pride in his bearing that were in themselves excuse enough for Madeleine's capitulation. Was it possible, Lena wondered, that James Towyn had really suffered when Genevieve was so easily consoled? Would he, had she had the strength of purpose, the depth of feeling that alone could have kept her faithful to an unspoken vow, have waited and eventually have defied his mother and Colonel Seymour in order to marry her? The mournful droop of his full but beautifully modelled lips suggested a capacity for passion; but there were already faint lines on either side of it that weakened its beauty with the evidence of self-indulgence. Lena withdrew her gaze. Mr. Towyn had replaced his hat, and was standing once more behind Madeleine's chair listening to the Rector's announcement.

"Before we sing 'Rule Britannia,' and adjourn for tea, we are to hear an unaccompanied song by Miss Paradise which will close the programme," he said, and turned towards the drawing-room window to give the performer her signal to advance.

Mary had taken off her hat. She came out across the terrace and stood at the top of the flight of steps that led down to the grass. Her face was pale, her eyes downcast. The crimson of her lips and the swallow-wing lift of her eyebrows showed dark on her white skin. Her hands were folded and held down in front of her, white against the folds of her silken flounces. Her little waist above the billowing skirt seemed hardly thicker than her arms. She stood there waiting for the buzz of talk to die down before she could begin. A few impatient youngsters in the back rows, failing to notice the hush of their elders, babbled on. The Rector had gone into the house as she came out of it, and so for the moment the ceremony was without its master. Mary stood swaying a little, feeling the strain. She pressed her lips together and raised her eyes, asking for help. The tall young man behind Madeleine's chair turned and looked back over the rows behind him. He raised his hand, and the silence grew absolute.

Mary, on the terrace, shifted her gaze, but she did not look at him. That she knew he was there, and that it was he who with a gesture had come to her rescue, was to Lena beyond question. For a second she hesitated, waiting for her breath and then her round, clear voice floated out over the garden :

*"Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine,"*

sang Mary.

Lena had never heard her sing the song before. As the smooth melody flowed on, she grew aware of that fear that so easily besets us when one of our own blood stands up in

La

public to win or forfeit the favour of an audience. The child had pitched her song high—too high. Lena trembled. When the tune lifted, would the young voice reach its pitch ?

" And I'll not ask for wine,"

sang Mary with a glad confidence, the nervousness of a moment ago lost in the release of song. And then, sure and clear, the sweet notes climbed upwards :

" The thirst that from the soul doth rise "

Lena breathed again ; the tension of her fear relaxed ; Mary had made no miscalculation.

" But might I of Jove's nectar sip "—

the song was loud with pride—

" I would not change for thine."

In the pause between the verses, no one stirred or whispered : and when Mary, still standing with her hands clasped and her eyes fixed as if in a waking dream, began to sing of the early rose, Lena's was not the only heart that missed a beat in delight at the soft, low sound.

But there was one person to whom Mary's singing gave no particular pleasure. Madeleine listened to it with an air of condescending patience, as though she considered these old-fashioned tunes rather boring. When it was over, she turned to James Towyn, who was joining languidly in the applause, and said :

" I had hoped Miss Paradise would give us a French or a German song."

" Ah, yes ! " he answered, " that would have been delightful. But perhaps nobody could be found to play the accompaniment for her."

Madeleine was annoyed. Was Mr. Towyn suggesting that she might have played the accompaniment herself? She rose from her seat and went up the steps to the terrace, where the Rector had already reappeared, and, seating herself at the piano, struck up "God save the Queen," giving several impromptu flourishes of her own to the accompaniment, with a great display of execution and command of the keyboard.

The Rector then announced that tea was served. A door in the wall at the end of the garden was opened, and one half of the audience filed out to the tent.

The rest of the company scattered about the lawn, greeting friends they had already seen and keeping up an animated appearance of being too engrossed in the social whirl to observe Mr. Towyn, who was holding a spirited conversation with Georgina.

Lena saw him speak to Madeleine for a moment, as if asking her permission for something he wished to do. Madeleine nodded, and, leading Georgina by the hand, moved away.

"He's gone to fetch Ettie down to the dining-room for tea," Georgina announced, skipping up to Lena and Miss Martin. "He wouldn't let nobody go with him."

"Two negatives, Georgina," said Miss Martin, drawing in her chin, "make an affirmative. And who may 'he' be?"

"Haven't you seen him?" said Georgina. "It's Mr. Towyn. He's Ettie's best friend now, instead of Miss Paradise."

Mrs. Bartram, who had remained in her chair, beckoned Lena to join her. She was not altogether satisfied about the award of the second prize. It should, in her opinion, have gone to James Tidy and not to the Webbs. Lena, who knew she was being blamed for Miss Martin's failure to side with Mrs. Bartram against the Rector's wife, did her best to allay Mrs. Bartram's displeasure and to lead her mind to more soothing contemplations. Tea, she thought, would do a

great deal. We shall be having tea very soon, she assured herself. But she could not say this, so she took advantage of a pause in Mrs. Bartram's complaint to ask if it were true that Lieutenant Bartram had been transferred to the flagship, as Mr. Simpson, the curate, had reported to her that morning in the library.

The change of theme was, for some reason, not altogether one for the better. Mrs. Bartram's third son was coming home on leave. The report was true enough. Mrs. Bartram expressed herself as not being at all sure that young men were not, as a rule, safer at sea, where they, and especially when they were naval officers, were not exposed to the Machiavellian designs of young women. The stout mother did not actually name the designer, but as she grumbled on, growing wheezy in her discontent, Lena became aware that Mary was nowhere to be seen. She glanced round the lawn. Impossible to miss the deep vivid pink of that taffeta gown. It was fully ten minutes since the child had finished her song. She should be in the garden helping Madeleine to shepherd her guests towards the drawing-room. The servants were already hovering inside the long window at the end of the terrace, a sign that everything was ready for tea to begin. Madeleine, at the end of the lawn, was shaking hands with a few farmers' wives who lingered there on their way to the field. The Rector was giving his arm to old Lady Horsley. Georgina was exchanging badinage with young Tom Grimthorpe, just down from Oxford. Mr. Simpson, the curate, had taken on the functions of a sheep-dog on the outskirts of the gathering, herding it together.

"They seem to be making a move," she said, "shall we go in to tea."

As she waited while Mrs. Bartram collected her fan, her handkerchief, and her parasol, Lena looked up at the creeper-clad front of the house. The two windows at the extreme left of the first floor were those of the schoolroom, where she herself had spent her days when Maud and Evangeline were her pupils. She knew every corner of the room.

It was Mary's domain now. The lower sash of the end window was up, and, as she looked at the empty space framed in the broad green leaves of the vine that covered the end of the house, she saw the gleam of a bright magenta sleeve flung out in a sudden gesture by the figure that was evidently standing against the wall inside. The little hand, with its cuff of white lace, was clenched, as if in some stress of feeling. For a moment it sawed the air helplessly, then fell out of sight.

"Come along, Miss Quibell," said Mrs. Bartram, now on her feet, with all her impedimenta collected. "I think I'll leave my shawl here. It drops off so if I have a tea-cup to manage."

"Let me take it," said Lena.

"Well, if you will be so kind. Dear me ! You look as if you had seen a ghost. Are you feeling faint ?"

"No, thank you," said Lena, "I am quite well. But tea will be very refreshing. It has been a little cold sitting still in the garden."

Mr. Towyn, with Ettie on his shoulder, was in the dining-room, the centre of an admiring throng of baby-lovers, by the time Mrs. Bartram's slow progress brought her and Lena in through the window. Mary was still invisible. Madeleine arrived and established herself at a round table to pour out tea ; the servants began to hand plates and dishes among the guests, who were now straying in through the windows. Two of the younger men present attended the tea-tables, and took the cups from Madeleine as she filled them. Georgina slipped and fell with a silver cake-basket she was importantly carrying about, and in the bustle this little accident occasioned Lena did not see by what door or window Mary came. But she had not come in unnoticed.

"Miss Quibell," said Tom Grimthorpe, at her elbow, "will you present me to Miss Paradise ? I want to tell her how very fetching that song she gave us was."

Mary was there, slender, unruffled, demure, carrying back to the table the tea-cup the Squire had emptied at a draught.

"Very kind of you, Miss Paradise," the Squire was saying in his loud, hearty voice. "I feel like Jove enjoying the ministrations of Hebe."

Lena performed the introduction young Grimthorpe requested, and Mary received it with the little foreign curtsy that spread the flounces of her crinoline outward on the floor. They remained in conversation for a minute or two, but Mary refused the young man's offer to get her some tea.

"Not just yet, thank you," she said. "I must help Mrs. Malory till everybody else has been served"; and she made her way to the tea-table, promising that she would let Mr. Grimthorpe know when she was ready to allow him to look after her.

A few minutes later Mr. Towyn took his leave, bowing over the hand of each lady with whom he was acquainted.

Lena noticed that he did not say good-bye to Mary. She was talking to the doctor when he left the room, and he did not look in her direction as he kissed Ettie in the doorway.

3

The hot weather began suddenly two days after the Flower Show. Madeleine, who had not been very well for some weeks, and had overtired herself with the Flower Show and other summer duties and pleasures, lay in a darkened room at the Rectory, prostrated by the heat. Up at the emporium, all the doors and windows stood open so that the air might circulate through the low rooms and narrow passages of the old house. Miss Martin moved her stools and embroidery frame into the shadow of the wall by the fireplace, away from the heat of the little glass porch where the scented geraniums and the pots of musk began to breathe

out almost too much fragrance to the sun. Lena tired early in the afternoon of her tasks in the library, and slept instead of going for her daily walk before tea. Only Mary, slipping off to the Rectory every day in her short-sleeved Swiss muslin dresses, seemed cool and unaffected by the change.

"It was hotter than this in July at Lausanne," she said when Miss Martin praised her for her cheerful endurance.

"Mary seems to thrive on heat," observed Miss Martin to Lena as they sat in the library waiting until three o'clock, when they agreed to close daily for the rest of the summer.

"Yes," said Lena. She did not look up from the labels she was writing, or seem to be paying much attention to what Christie said. But as she printed "BARCHESTER TOWERS" in sloping capitals on the strip of paper in front of her, Mary's face, lit by an inner glow that had transfused it for the past week, floated between her eyes and her work. She could not shake off the gnawing sense of her own failure of courage half an hour ago, when she had seen Mary pass through the garden on her way to the Rectory for Georgina's music lesson and had not followed or called out to ask her why she had changed from the clean gingham frock she had worn all the morning into the white embroidered dress that, next to the magenta taffeta, was the most elegant of all her wardrobe. Mary had made it from the gown of white Indian embroidery that had been a present to Mrs. Paradise from one of her husband's merchant friends. Mary had inherited several silk and muslin gowns with her mother's lace and jewellery, and had in them still unexhausted material for the exercise of her own ingenuity in the confection of costumes. Lena, herself fastidious and careful in every detail of her own toilet, had recognised and approved the same characteristic in her niece. Mary's dresses were few but good; their upkeep and renovation occupied all her leisure. Every penny of her modest salary was spent on well-considered additions to her wardrobe or

saved towards the purchase of the sealskin coat it was her avowed ambition to possess in the coming winter.

She had begged that *Les Modes Parisiennes* should be added to the list of periodicals circulated by the library, and would pore the whole evening through on each newly arrived copy before it was sent on its rounds among the Queen's Beaton ladies, who regarded the innovation with favour. Lena noticed that fashion papers were her only reading. No book had been added to those on the bookshelf in her bedroom, where *Le Jardin des Racines Grecques*, *Perles de la Poésie Française*, and two Bibles, one English and one French, had been joined on Christmas Day by *Flowers : their Use and Beauty, Language and Sentiment*, given her by Miss Martin. Lena's own present, *Esmond*, stood on the table by the bed. The novel was particularly dear to her, but, so far as she had seen, Mary had never attempted to read it. It was true that her mornings and part of her afternoons were occupied in teaching Georgina, though the task involved no study on the young teacher's part. Mary did well enough if she practised her singing in the morning and spent half an hour at the piano later in the day. The child was never idle, Lena told herself, putting *Barchester Towers* on the same shelf as *The Warden* and *The Small House at Allington*. Had she not sewn all Lord Lytton's novels into fresh green covers only a month ago, and printed new labels for them too? Christie had teased her about it, saying, "Mary would rather cover a dozen novels than read one"

To which the girl had replied :

"Oh, Aunt Christie, I am reading one. It is called *Granville de Vigne*. There is a chapter in every number of the *New Monthly Magazine*."

Lena had been startled at the time. She had never seen Mary reading the magazine. The child had a baffling power of secrecy. There was no reason why she should not be reading a serial story ; none either why she should not read it openly. Lena had glanced at one instalment of the tale by a writer new to her, and, reading it, had wondered

whether something a little overheated and flamboyant in its style and subject had, while rousing Mary's enthusiasm, warned her that her appreciation would not be shared by Miss Martin and her aunt.

It was a small matter in itself. Mary's eyes had never been more candid than when she raised them to make her admission of the reading. She possibly had not realised it was a secret from her aunt. But there were other matters equally small but not equally unimportant. Lena had not spoken to Mary about the taffeta dress. But she remembered now that Mary had not spoken of it either, and had not shown herself before leaving the house for the garden-party. Nor had she asked the girl what she had been doing in the schoolroom before tea that afternoon. It was, after all, difficult to make the enquiries without seeming unwarrantably suspicious. Mary had been absent for a quarter of an hour at the most. She had every right to take a moment's rest after her part in the concert. She had behaved in the most exemplary manner when she did return to the company in the dining-room, and had, Lena had observed, managed young Grimthorpe with perfect self-possession and propriety, being neither embarrassed by, nor over-responsive to, his evident admiration. Lena believed that she could account for every moment of Mary's uneventful days. And yet—there was an excitement, an increase of bloom, a subdued sparkle about the child that made her lovelier than ever, and could not be ignored, and that nothing since her little triumph at the garden-party seemed to warrant. Was it merely the influence of summer on youth? Was she, Lena, growing fretful and suspicious, like any jealous old maid? The questions chased one another through her mind. Why had Mary not said she was changing her dress? Why had she hurried through the garden instead of passing through the library on her way out?

"I must be sour for lack of exercise," said Lena to herself. "It is cooler to-day; I shall go for a walk."

Once she had traversed the unsheltered rise of ground that hid the chestnut avenue from anyone entering the white gates of the park, Lena closed her parasol and began to walk more quickly, in order to gain the grass rides in the shade of the double row of trees on either side of the sandy roadway.

She chose the left-hand side, with the river flowing broad and calm beyond the shadow of the farthest branches, in preference to the right-hand avenue, bounded by the steep hillside, its hanging woods cut by the windings of the private road to the Castle. Here she walked on many an afternoon throughout the year, at the hour when the outward traffic to the railway junction to catch the mid-day trains was over, and the homeward-bound journeys after the arrival of the mail at four o'clock had not begun. It was quieter here than in the woods around the town, where children were always playing on summer afternoons; there was every chance of a solitary walk under the chestnut branches, now dark with the heavy green of midsummer leaves.

But, as her eyes accustomed themselves to the change from the glare of the sandy road in the broad sunlight to the dappled shadows and the green turf of the avenue, Lena saw that she was not the only walker there. Some two hundred yards in front of her a little figure was speeding ahead with quick, decided footsteps—not in the leisured manner of one walking for enjoyment, but as a person in haste to be arrived at some appointed goal. As the figure passed out of the shadow of one tree through the irregular patch of sunlight that marked the space between it and the next, Lena saw the brilliance of white muslin, the glow of cherry-coloured ribands. Mary walked bare-headed, carrying her hat by its strings. The sunlight burnished the smooth coils of her hair on either side of her head and illuminated the joyful footsteps of her hurrying feet. Then she passed into the shadow again and was no more than another moving shade in that leafy gloom.

Before she realised it, Lena had quickened her pace and

was running through the grass in pursuit of the figure that flitted in and out of the dappling sunlight at an ever increasing distance ahead of her.

The handle of her parasol caught in her flounced skirt, and almost tripped her up. The parasol fell to the ground, and as she stooped to recover it she grew aware of the quickened beating of her heart. She was out of breath ; her temples throbbed ; her throat was dry. She was no match for the swiftly walking girl who sped along the turf with the light fleetness of youth. Lena stood a moment to recover herself, and was astonished that so slight an exertion should have overcome her so quickly. Then she realised that her trouble was not due to physical causes alone. The impulse that had caused her to break into this ignominious running and defeat did not spring from a friendly desire for companionship. She had not wanted to be with Mary ; she had wanted to prevent her ; to thwart some project, to forestall some disaster the nature of which was now suddenly and completely clear to her at last.

As she stood there, unable to move a step forward, the figure under the trees turned and, crossing a patch of sunlight, made for the roadway. Lena moved towards the central avenue. Mary crossed the open, sanded space and went into the grass-ride by the hill. There was a small wicket in the paling that fenced the thicket from the grass on the farther side of the chestnut-trees. Mary paused by it and drew something from her pocket. Though she could not see it, Lena knew by the girl's movement that this was a key. Then she saw Mary unlock the wicket gate and vanish into the wood.

How long she stood there, gazing down the avenue where no figure moved any more, Lena did not know. Nor did she remember turning her own steps homeward. It was not until she was outside the park gates and once more walking down Queen Street, now flooded with the rosy light of sunset, that she realised where she was.

Her mind had taken its own way, carrying her back into the past. She had been walking once more in the pinewoods below Hohenfels, a girl lost in the maze of youth at odds with its own disaster. Once more she seemed to breathe the keen, clear air, to smell the resinous fragrance of that mountain summer in the Austrian village where, for one short week, her life had unfolded and bloomed in the radiance of love and hope and the promise of a future too glorious for her, even then, to believe it could be possible. She was on probation, the English girl whom Felix von Hohenfels desired to marry, come to stay for a month in the summer home in the mountains with his elder brother, the head of the family, and his difficult, exclusive wife. At first things had gone smoothly enough. Frau von Hohenfels had been almost gracious, the Graf himself most cordial. And then Madge had come. Madge, with her red-gold hair and melting eyes and the rich laughter that carried her through any resistance and into every favour everywhere. In two days the change had come. Felix had grown grave and uneasy. His brother was joining in that golden laughter, was everywhere in pursuit of Madge's shining hair ; and his brother's wife—their difficult hostess, who had been barely polite to Lena herself—grew silent and bitter, and would hardly speak to Felix, much less to Lena, his not yet accepted betrothed. It was in the pinewoods that the catastrophe had come. Lena, walking there alone, already uneasy and afraid to speak to Felix of what she had seen but was trying not to admit, had met Hedwig von Hohenfels rushing down from the arbour above the waterfall, where she had discovered Madge and the enamoured Graf. That night the sisters had left the Castle, Lena, in an agony of youthful shame and pride, cutting herself off from Felix, declaring herself the protector and avenger of her sister's tarnished virtue, refusing his offer to escort them on the long and broken journey they were taking so precipitately with so little preparation. Lena relived the long hours in diligence

and post-chaise ; the waiting at coaching inns ; the sleepless nights ; the torture of August days on the dusty roads of the plains, so breathless and unsheltered after the cool mountain air. She remembered her own despair, numb and silent, as she tried to hush Madge's noisy anger and remorse. And then Madge had run away one night in a thunderstorm, while they were waiting at Boulogne for the boat to take them to England. She had been found on the ramparts of the old town, wet through and distraught, by a stranger, a Mr. Paradise, who was waiting for the same boat, but staying, as a wise and experienced traveller, at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. He had taken the lovely child back to his hotel, where she sobbed out her own version of her tale to him as she sat wrapped in the *patronne's* ample dressing-gown, her feet in Mr. Paradise's own carpet slippers, sipping the tisane that calmed her agitation and sent her to sleep. Lena, who had spent a frantic and sleepless night, was amazed next morning when Madge was restored to her, and they embarked for the Channel crossing under the solid care of her rescuer, to see the change in her sister. Madge sat on deck, wrapped in her unknown benefactor's travelling plaid, and accepted his careful tending with glances in which gratitude gave way to admiration. The summer sea was calm. The keen air invigorated and restored her. She began to smile. Before they reached Dover, Lena heard her laughter as she passed. Lena herself, represented to Madge's rescuer as the dragon who guarded her without kindness, walked the deck through the long hours of the crossing and felt the ice that had hardened around her own grief melt away and leave it alive and torn with anguish.

Within a month Madge had married Mr. Paradise and was settled in his ample house at Bristol, where she was soon at loggerheads with her stepsons, boys of sixteen and seventeen, impervious to her fascination ; and Lena at twenty-two had begun her career as finishing governess to the daughters of good families in England.

For years now Lena had schooled herself to keep the memory of these weeks hidden and unacknowledged; to forget, as Madge had so readily forgotten, the woods of Hohenfels and the ruined promise of her own love.

She had even from time to time visited Mr. and Mrs. Paradise in the comfortable home from which the stepsons had been exiled, and had seen Mary, at intervals of several years, develop from a delicate baby into a sturdy little girl sufficiently like her mother to provoke no general comment on her complete unlikeness to Mr. Paradise. Indeed, for all Madge ever said or Lena ever allowed herself to think, Mr. Paradise actually was the child's father.

It was not until the terms of his will were disclosed that Lena suspected him of any inkling that this might not be so. Even that disposition of his property might have meant no more than an act of reparation to the sons who had been ousted by the young wife, or that Madge herself had succeeded in disillusioning her husband before she died.

And thus, on the surface of her mind, Lena had kept her steady thought ever since Christmas Eve, when the first sight of Mary's white face and slanting eyebrows had shown her a ghost of Felix at nineteen, as she had first seen him in Thuringia two years before the summer of their abortive betrothal. She had known then that this girl, not her child or his, was yet born of a community of blood that made her kin to each. By coming to the buried seclusion of the Beatons, to make her home in the most retired of its dwellings, Mary had bridged the seas and linked the mountains that separated the Chantry House in Castle Gate from the crags and towers of Hohenfels. She was, by some chance inflection, some swift gesture, some idiosyncrasy of reticence or response, to confirm every day the evidence of her birth, and the reality of the passion that lay buried but still living in the hidden chambers of Lena's heart.

It was this knowledge that had cast a constraint over Lena's attitude during the first days of Mary's sojourn in the Chantry House, and had resulted in making the girl

feel more quickly at home with Miss Martin than with her aunt. Lena had never spoken of it to her friend. Christina Martin had never heard the connected tale. She ignored the names of place and person associated with that early trouble in Lena's history. The two ladies were no longer at the age of detailed romantic confessions when their friendship began to establish itself. When the time for them to share one home arrived, they were already well known and assuredly dear to one another, and were too happy and too occupied with the present to enquire closely into each other's completed and buried past.

Domesticity does not afford an atmosphere in which old and unhappy loves are likely to be discussed. The beloved friend sitting on the other side of the hearth is more securely guarded against the recitals of a tragic memory when it wakes, than some casual stranger who may chance to show sympathy in an unguarded hour, and who will pass on to forget perhaps, certainly to be beyond the power of reminder, when the tale is over. It is our most distant friends who know our deepest secrets. So Lena had kept silence, conquering her heart, and had loved Mary for what she was, trying to shut out those others who spoke in her voice and looked out from her eyes and gave delicacy to her features and a golden richness to the coils of her smooth, dark hair.

But, now that so carefully erected barrier was down, the truth behind it stood the clearer in all its implications because of the events that had led up to its destruction.

There was, hidden in the gentleness and reserve of Mary's character, the flaw that had come to her, an inheritance from her mother as unmistakable as the golden light in her hair. Madge Quibell had been furtive in her sudden treachery and passion as she had been when plotting to obtain the lesser desires of her youth. Blinding herself wilfully by the recognition of other and more fastidious qualities in Madge's child, Lena had refused to recognise this fault in Mary on the earlier, smaller occasions when it

had manifested itself. Now it was flagrant. Mary was meeting someone—but whom? The very precision of her walk, something determined and defiant in the set of her shoulders, the unswerving haste of her onward course, had betrayed her own consciousness of evasion. O foolish, foolish Mary! To choose there where so many had chosen in vain, and to have no patience, no dignity, no truth to throw into the scales so heavily weighted against you!

Genevieve Seymour, with wealth, position, and a place in the same world, had failed, not only because of the hastiness and imprudence of her aunt, too eager to make assurance sure, but also—of this Lena had no doubt—by reason of something shallow and impatient in her own nature. Lena could have taught Genevieve to wait, could have helped her to win her desire, had that desire sprung from any depth of feeling, had it been kindled by any genuine and lasting flame. But Mary, lovelier than Genevieve, more sensitive, more delicate, fit in herself to rise to any position that wealth and rank could offer, had taken the one course that must increase the handicap of her situation, the course that must, if persisted in, make that situation ruinous.

Fortunately, matters had not had time to go beyond help. Nobody, so Lena told herself, could know of this afternoon's assignation so carefully planned, so quietly carried out. She herself had come upon the tryst by accident. And yet had her following of the girl been accidental after all? Had not Mary, slipping so lightly through the garden in the creamy richness of her embroidered dress, really given herself away? And with what excuse had she freed herself from Georgina before tea-time? The nearer her thoughts drew to it, the more dangerous Mary's plight began to look. Lena was in High Street now, climbing the cobbled path to Castle Gate. Mary would not be home for at least an hour. She often did not return from the Rectory till six o'clock. Lena threw a sudden thought to this recent prolongation of her schoolroom hours. Was it, too, part of the deception she had detected this afternoon? There was no help

for it ; she must tell Christie what she had seen, what she was now bound to suspect. Poor Christie, who set an almost superstitious value on everything connected with Lady Gervaise, she would be very much agitated and distressed. But Lena could no longer conceal her own knowledge from Christie, nor was it possible to allow her no say in the course of action they must both now be prepared to follow. Lena sighed, but her footsteps quickened as she came to this decision. It would be a relief to take counsel in her perplexity, and to have no small secret to conceal any longer from this wisest, dearest companion.

But Miss Martin was in no mood to listen to any tale of suspicion and circumstantial evidence when Lena came in.

"Here you are, my dear," she said, as Lena entered the dining-room. "I have cut one of the French lettuces from the kitchen garden for tea. Their hearts are quite large and fine now. This cooling breeze has refreshed me. I feel altogether a different person. I do hope your walk has done you as much good as my quiet hour has done me. Matilda will brew the tea immediately. Our young governess is no doubt taking tea in the schoolroom again to-day, as she is not already returned. You must be thirsty after your walk."

Lena laid aside her hat and parasol and stood by the dining-room window while Miss Martin, with a triumphant gesture that would not have disgraced a seneschal introducing a baked peacock on a golden dish, deposited on the table the plate on which a washed and opened lettuce curled, and added a cut-glass salt-cellar to the usual tea equipment.

"My dear," she said, pouring hot water into each tea-cup and straightening the spoons which Matilda would never set in line with the handles, "I have news for you. Lady Gervaise returns to the Castle next week. Matilda heard it from Mrs. MacFarlane's housemaid, who is engaged to the head groom. I do not approve," she went on gaily, "of servants' gossip, nor do I listen to it as a rule,

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but this is news. She has been at Bath taking the waters this six weeks. I have *wondered* that we have not seen her drive out since Whitsuntide."

Lena came slowly to the table. So this was why Christie had been a little depressed lately. She was seeing the summer go by in vain. Poor little Christie ! And now her new contentment would be dashed ; her pleasure in the prospect of soon being able to greet once more, this so distant, so much revered imaginary friend, was to suffer an eclipse, be clouded by the story she must sooner or later hear. Lena hesitated. She could not tell it now. Perhaps, after all, she need not tell it ever. Her forebodings might be no more than a natural anxiety magnified by the mists of the past, that had risen and troubled her vision. Mary, when she came in, might volunteer an explanation of her afternoon walk ; if she did not, Lena must question her and be satisfied herself before communicating her thoughts and discoveries to her friend.

It was six o'clock before a light step flitted across the hall, up the staircase, to the bedroom at the end of the gallery. Lena, sitting by the open parlour window, heard the faint movement overhead and knew that Mary had returned without coming in to greet her aunt and Miss Martin. She went on with her sewing for a few minutes, in the hope that the girl would descend and join them. Then, hearing no sound of footsteps on the landing or staircase, she rose with a sigh and made her way upstairs.

There was no answer to her light tap on the door ; no one stirred in the room within. Lena raised the latch and entered.

Mary stood at the dressing-table, leaning on it with both hands, absorbed in the contemplation of her own face in the little heart-shaped mirror that was tilted slightly so that Lena, approaching it from behind, could see what Mary saw without throwing her own reflection on the glass. The face that looked out of the mirror was lit, as if from within, by a radiance that transfigured the mortal beauty, making of

it an image unearthly in its loveliness and rapture. The face that Mary saw was, for that moment, the face her lover carried as a jewel in his mind's imaginary sight. The mirror held up to her, not herself for herself's own sake, but the image he adored. She gazed at it because, so gazing, she might still prolong the hour she had shared with him, see what he had seen, and be at once the loved and the loving in a solitude that was, for its moment, more completely blissful than that shared and troubling hour. The trance that held her seemed to spread its influence throughout the room, so that Lena, entering unheard, was captured by its spell, convinced by the logic of its madness. She had come to remonstrate ; she found herself participating with consent.

The few seconds in which she stood silent and entranced stretched into the timeless eternity of a revelation. The wound in her own heart opened, and in the flood of its pulsing she became one with this other vulnerability that was, as yet, untouched by pain. She had come to question and frustrate, and had found a flame that every impulse of her own life urged her to foster and shield.

"Mary," she said, "Mary, my dear."

The girl turned, startled out of her trance, the glow of her joy extinguished. Her face paled ; even her lips grew white, and the shining of her eyes was veiled, as with drooped lids she stood facing the breaker of her dream.

The spell was shattered. Cold common-sense, the urge of an inescapable duty to perform, the life-long habit of accepting responsibility for the young in her charge, resumed their sway.

"I was in the park this afternoon," said Lena, speaking with stiff lips, against her will. "I was in the chestnut avenue."

Mary stood silent, without raising her eyes.

"I saw you there."

Still Mary made no sign.

Lena drew her breath quickly. This intolerable thing she had begun must be finished, and quickly.

"How did you get the key of the spinney?" she asked.

There was a sudden stiffening of the girl's back. She drew herself together, standing proudly with raised head and level eyes that looked at Lena as at a stranger who has no right to question. Her hands fell to her side, clenched; a flush burned in her cheek. So, cried Lena's memory, so once Felix had stood to answer an unwarranted curiosity.

"I picked it up on the path," said Mary Paradise, offering her lie without shame, as the base coin with which presumption is duly paid.

4

"You see," said Madeleine, "Georgina is so observant, and you know, dearest Lena, how much you yourself always disliked white lies. And Richard is even more particular. So there really does seem nothing for it but to send her away to school."

"At once!"

"We think she can go for the summer holiday to Maud. Her eldest girl is going to Miss Janion's in September, and Georgina can go with her. Then, when she comes home for Christmas, she will find the new baby among her other presents and take it all for granted."

"That, certainly, seems the best way."

"I knew you would see our position. I have wanted to talk it over with you for a long time, ever since I began to suspect my own condition. But at first Richard would not consent to send Georgina away. He did not at all like the idea. Men do not understand our natural delicacy about these things. He seems to imagine that I actually might tell Georgina."

"Have you said anything to Mary?"

"Oh, Lena, how could I? She is a young girl, too. She might not understand. I want you to explain to her."

"You want me to tell Mary that Georgina is going to school at once and that she will no longer be needed to give her lessons?"

"Yes, Lena—the schoolroom will be, so to speak, closed."

"What about Ettie?"

"Oh, Ettie's lessons were only a joke. Richard did rather want them to go on. He thought it so wonderful that she had learnt to play 'Nellie Bly' on the piano with both hands. But I can quite well go on with Ettie's music lessons and teach her her alphabet myself, especially now that I cannot be expected to go about visiting the parishioners any longer. Besides, it might embarrass Mary herself to be much in the house presently."

"I don't think that need trouble you, Madeleine. Mary has lived abroad for some years, and was with her cousins at Neuchâtel when their little boy was born last October. Still, if she cannot be of any use to you . . ."

"Frankly, Lena, I'm afraid she is not serious enough to be trusted at such a time. There was the accident to Ettie's lamb, you remember. And several people have commented on the unsuitability of that red silk dress she wore at the Flower Show. I should feel anxious all the time Ettie was with her, especially now that James Towyn comes to see the child so often. He is quite foolish about Ettie. I feel I ought to be most careful, lest he should spoil my little girl. And, of course, Mary could have no more authority than Nurse has over the child if he should ever call and ask to see Ettie when I was out."

"Has he ever done this?"

"I'm afraid so, Lena. And there have been great romps in the schoolroom. Georgina tells me that one day last week she played Weber's Last Waltz, and that Miss Paradise and Mr. Towyn actually danced several times after he had waltzed about with Ettie in his arms till Nurse came to take her out."

"I see," said Lena slowly. "But you will want to

discourage Mr. Towyn's visits on your own account very soon now."

"It won't be necessary, dear Lena. He will be going to Scotland and then to stay with the Duke, and they are always at Carlton House Terrace in November. I don't suppose we shall see James Towyn again till Christmas."

"And by that time the new baby will have arrived."

"The second or third week in December, so Dr. MacFarlane tells me."

"Very well, Madeleine. I will tell Mary that you will not need her at the Rectory when Georgina goes away to her sister's. How soon will that be?"

"As soon as possible. I do not really think we need trouble Mary to come down again. She has had such severe headaches once or twice lately, and has not been able to stay to give Georgina tea in the schoolroom. She had one yesterday. I am sure you must be anxious about her."

"Yes," said Lena, "I am anxious about her. I think you are probably quite right, and that she had better not return to the Rectory again."

"Perhaps it is her eyes. Headaches often come from eye-strain. She should try wearing spectacles. They would make her look more serious and responsible, which would be an advantage when she applies for another situation. Richard told me to say how gladly he will recommend her. I really should make her wear spectacles, Lena."

Lena contented herself with replying to that part of Madeleine's speech which conveyed the Rector's offer. Soon after she left the garden, where she had been taking tea with Madeleine, who had begun to assume the languors considered proper to a lady who knew herself to be in what she and everybody else would have called an interesting condition, weeks before that condition could be suspected by others or felt as an inconvenience by herself.

She walked up the hill, slowly revolving in her anxious mind all Madeleine had not said.

Only yesterday she had returned, as anxious but less certain, even then, of the extent of Mary's entanglement. That it was serious she no longer doubted. The headaches of which Mary had made no complaint at home ; those visits to the schoolroom of which she had never breathed the news, were all so many witnesses to a state of affairs that had already gone too far. Yesterday, for a moment, she had seen with Mary's eyes, felt with her the enchantment under which she had fallen. To-day, through Madeleine's side-lit evasions of her real reason for turning Mary out of the Rectory, she saw the whole business from outside as a hopeless and dangerous folly ; the trifling of an idle and thoughtless young man with a girl whose beauty and irresponsibility were his lure and the excuse for his conduct.

There was no help for it now : Christie must be told. They must watch Mary carefully, since it was useless to attempt to bring her to confession and the promise of reserve ; find her indoor occupation, allow her no unaccompanied walks until they had ascertained that Mr. Towyn had gone away. Later on, perhaps, they might hear of some position she could fill.

Lena was at the garden gate by now : she stood there, the latch unlifted, her heart suddenly filled with bitter distaste for the task she had set herself, as though, all against her will, she were about to shut a skylark in a cage.

Miss Martin was far less agitated by the tale Lena had to convey than she might have been had Lena been able to let her see the full extent of its possibilities.

But, as so often happens when we at last put into words the surmise we have built up from a variety of small events and the warnings of our own inner perception of their full implication, Lena found she had, after all, very little to tell.

Madeleine was expecting another baby in December, and had decided to send Georgina away to school. Mary had met and spoken with James Towyn when he visited the

Rectory, and had once, for a few moments, danced with him in the schoolroom while Georgina played. She had also met him at least once, and clandestinely, and had, for a short time yesterday afternoon, been in the Malquoits woods, using a key that admitted her by a private door. When questioned, she had said she had found the key on the ground.

"Some careless gamekeeper must have dropped it," declared Miss Martin hastily. "I hope the child had the sense to leave it at the lodge as she came home. She should *not*, she certainly should not have *used* it, Lena. We must explain that to her. Even if Mr. Towyn has taken notice of her, she should not have *trespassed*."

Lena was nonplussed. She could not tell Christie that Mary had lied about the key. She could not tell Christie that her eager transference of the seriousness of Mary's action from the real and quite obvious nature of her escape was, in its turn, almost as wilful a lie. She had shielded Mary a little in telling her tale to Christie: but Christie, hearing it, was shielding the girl altogether. The fragile edifice Christie had maintained for so many years on the foundation of her now so distant claim on Lady Gervaise's recognition was being protected against the shock from without implicit in Lena's revelations. Christie was refusing to recognise their full, even their true, significance. Lena tried another aspect of the situation.

"Madeleine tells me," she said, "that Mary has been complaining of headaches, and has left the Rectory before tea several times during the last few weeks."

Christie was only too ready to take up this fresh thread and to follow it away from the main issue.

"But this is serious," she exclaimed. "The heat has affected her more than we supposed it was doing. We have been so prostrated by it ourselves that we have not noticed how it was affecting her. Where is she now?"

"She was still at the Rectory when I left," said Lena, "and I do not think she has suffered from the heat. She

has seemed better in health for some weeks lately than I have yet seen her."

"Ever since the Flower Show," said Miss Martin unexpectedly. Lena understood then. Christie knew as much, possibly even more, than she did, but she was not going to admit it. "How I blunder," sighed poor Lena to herself, lost for a moment in that jungle that winds and climbs about all human relationships and will sometimes thicken and twist between the closest friends.

It seemed on the surface that no life could be more simple and more happy than theirs, two friends who had both reached an age when experience has given wisdom ; who both extended an equal goodwill towards a young and lovable girl. And yet here they were, Lena never completely out of the shadow of a tragedy her tongue had forgotten, so that to speak of it was an impossibility, though its influence still governed her approach to almost every situation life could present, and, in the ultimate issue, shut her off from the tenderest sympathy ; Mary, the embodied reminder of that tragedy, shut off, as youth nearly always must be, from maturity, by all the barriers of a natural reserve augmented in her case by the flaw in her honesty that increased her own danger and doubled the problem of safeguarding her wilful impulses ; Christie, the simplest and best of all three, with no shadow too heavy for speech in all the quiet trials of her past ; yet withheld and biased, she too, by a private dream, having her own way of retreat, her own mystery ; able to hide and baffle by a capricious withdrawal, an equally capricious revelation of her understanding.

"It will"—Miss Martin was speaking again—"it will be best to give Mary *plenty* of occupation for the next week or so. Is not this the very opportunity we have longed for ? You want to revise the catalogue. You could work at it in the study all the morning, and let Mary attend to the subscribers. I should be there to help in any detail unfamiliar to her."

"Yes," said Lena, glad that the hypothetical eye-strain was now dismissed from the other's mind, "that is a very good idea. Mary will enjoy seeing the people who come in."

"They will enjoy seeing her," said Miss Martin, and looked at Lena over her spectacles with twinkling eyes. "It will, of course, be very *complicated*, but we shall have to manage."

CHAPTER VI

AN AUNT IN SHROPSHIRE

I

Mary began her duties in the library on the Monday following Lena's interview with Madeleine. Lena had, in accordance with Madeleine's wishes, said nothing of the change of plan until after Mary's return from the Rectory on the Saturday morning. Madeleine, knowing her step-daughter, had felt it wiser to break no news to Georgina.

"I shall let her gather for herself—try to fill her mind with the idea of going to the seaside, so that she will not realise that her lessons with Miss Paradise are over," said the weak and anxious young woman, putting off an evil hour.

"Mary can come down one day, after Georgie has gone, to collect her books and needlework. She can come in the morning while Ettie is out with Nurse," she added, as though it were an afterthought.

Lena had been too preoccupied with her own realisation of all that lay behind Madeleine's decision to combat the unkindness of her method of putting it into execution. The sooner Mary was removed from the place where her presence had created so much unacknowledged as well as so much outspoken dislike the better. She said nothing in criticism of Madeleine's suggestion, confining herself to accepting it so far as her own intervention was concerned. When it came to the point, she, too, had yielded something to her own wish to avoid giving unnecessary pain, and had told Mary that Madeleine's state of health made it advisable to send Georgina away immediately, and that she herself wished to begin work on the catalogue at once.

Mary had accepted the news as something that hardly concerned herself. She was still lost in her dream, breaking away from it only for a few startled moments to attend to the business of life, and then regaining its enveloping shelter, to lose herself therein once more. Sometimes she would show an instant's alarm, as if for some preciousness that might suffer loss if unguarded. Lena, after her first defeat, had not attempted to question Mary again. She had a horror of acting on conclusions that were not entirely substantiated. She had, moreover, an alternating sympathy with the girl's visible infatuation and a surging desire to believe herself mistaken in supposing it existed. She told herself, in long, miserable recapitulation of the facts in her possession, that she could be certain only of Madeleine's unconcealed jealousy of Mary, and of the visits that James Towyn had paid to the nursery and schoolroom at the Rectory under the pretext of being amused by Ettie and Georgina. She could not be sure that Mary had slipped away from the garden concert to meet the young man for a few moments in the schoolroom. All she had seen was a glimpse of the girl's magenta sleeve. She had not dared to put her quicksuspicion into words on that occasion. And she did not know that he had been in the spinney when Mary entered it by means of the key she might have found on the drive as she crossed it. There was Mary's own rapt and shining face to give evidence of some preoccupation more enthralling than any interest of their common life. But youth has its dreams, kept secret from those who have forgotten how deep and how unspeakable these can be. Lena had once taught a girl, very little younger than Mary, who had gone about through one whole summer with just that look of inner brooding and delight, until it had been discovered by her schoolboy brother that she was writing poetry in secret. The mockery of the rest of her family had cured her of verse-making and also of her dreamy happiness ; but Lena, who watched the little drama, had never been able to laugh at its victim, silly as her discovered verses had proved when

chanted in chorus by her tormentors. Her own memory could still, at times, wrap her in the soft cocoon that youth spins around its tender, wild imaginings; could re-create for her the struggling anguish that may come when that muffling illusion is torn away. If Mary were spinning a solitary web around the image of the careless enchanter who had filled the idle hours of his summer by playing with her small charges, no great harm had been done. Indeed, the greatest harm that could be done to her in that case would be the substantiating of her guarded fancy by questions that could only give it reality and danger.

If, said Lena, still arguing with herself, the young man had paid no more heed to Mary than to any other governess he might meet in the schoolroom of a friend's children, the girl would suffer no greater consequence than the veiled enmity that had most clearly prompted Madeleine's action. And that, she knew, arose from a jealousy quite as much of Mary's loveliness of face and of her charm for the determined and indulged Ettie, as for any attention James Towyn had paid her.

Lena was not pleased with Madeleine. A young woman in her condition was often capricious and unreasonable. Lena was prepared to make every allowance for Madeleine on that count: but the girl's character had hardened with marriage, and her outlook, never a wide one, had become conventional and shallow to a degree Lena had not foreseen in the gentle and affectionate pupil she had educated with all the wisdom and care at her command. The Rector treated his young wife rather too much as a child. He was a busy man who had fallen in love late in life. His first marriage had been one of convenience, made when he was young and ambitious and needed a wife to help his own advancement. Madeleine Seymour had touched his heart at a moment when the prospect of his own loneliness had begun to alarm him. He saw in her a fresh and gentle creature, lonely too, and more than ready to adore him. Having married her, he endowed her with

every virtue and grace necessary to the justification of his own late abandonment to passion. Just, kind, and charitable himself, he was persuaded that Madeleine's youth and inexperience alone prevented her display of the same qualities on every occasion. In the matter of Mary Paradise, he had been swayed entirely by his natural concern for Madeleine's own comfort, and, though he liked the girl and was pleased with Georgina's improvement, he made no attempt to dissuade his wife from putting an end to the schoolroom régime now that the nursery was to become doubly important. Lena had gathered as much from the Rector himself.

"Your niece is too good for us," he had said. "She must find a more important post. That, I am sure, will be easy."

"We shall be glad to have her with us for the present," Lena had replied, surprised to find herself slightly agitated by the same feeling as a hen displays so freely over the sole chick that has survived the perils of the hatching week.

2

Having Mary in the library to deal with the subscribers who came in every morning to exchange books and news was even more complicated than Miss Martin had foreseen.

Not that Mary herself was anything but quiet and assiduous and intelligent. She had the gift of knowing exactly when and when not to appeal for aid in any circumstance that taxed her own knowledge and ability. It was now the end of July, and during the seven months of her life in Queen's Beaton she had acquired a fair knowledge of the arrangement and contents of the various shelves where the books most constantly in circulation were stored, and could, when required, find any work of philosophy or criticism, provided that it were asked for by name. But when Mrs. Bartram, who seldom visited the library herself, sent down in haste for "something about astronomy,"

she crossed quietly to Miss Martin's chair and was directed to "*The Soul and the Stars*, on the top shelf of the bookcase under the stairs." She never issued any book in a black binding without saying, "Excuse me one moment ; I must enquire of my aunt whether this book is already promised to another subscriber," a phrase of her own invention that covered her retreat to the study, there to ascertain whether in Lena's opinion Miss Martin would allow the particular subscriber who had asked for it to take the volume away. These little excursions, and the short dialogues in which each of them assumed an almost solemn gravity, drew aunt and niece together in that peculiar and tacit understanding that subsists between two people who are mutually aware of one another's attitude towards a third. There was no disloyalty towards Miss Martin in their little conferences, the first of which had opened with Mary's, "I didn't like to trouble Aunt Christie," but there was an understanding, a shutting out of the dear but sometimes a little absurd third party in a way that readjusted the relationship between all three of them, and, for the first time, gave Lena the predominating part in it.

If this had been all, the innovation would have seemed peaceful enough, and Lena, glad to be freed for the completion of a task she had never had time to finish since she first reorganised the shelves, might have worked at it with an easy mind. But Mary Paradise had in herself that which brought disturbance where she was without any speech or gesture of her own. It was unlikely that the appearance of Miss Paradise and the disappearance of Miss Quibell from the librarian's desk behind the long table should pass without notice among the inhabitants of Queen's Beaton. The news that the girl, whose beauty was already notorious, was to be seen and spoken with any day by anyone who took the trouble to climb up High Street to Castle Gate produced, after the first two mornings, a marked increase in the number of persons who found themselves in need of a new book or a fresh piece of needlework. By the end of the

month, five new subscriptions had been added to the library's accounts.

Among the new subscribers the most disingenuous was Mr. Tom Grimthorpe, who strolled in one afternoon just before three o'clock and explained that he had been thinking things over, and had come to the conclusion that it was time he took up reading. He needed a great deal of advice. Mary, with more spirit than Miss Martin had expected her to display, said that she could only advise him to call again in three weeks' time, when Miss Quibell would be able to give his needs her full attention. And, when the young man protested that in three weeks' time he would have gone to Norfolk, and that he needed to be made to read some good poetry at once, she walked away from him demurely and returned with a copy of *Firmilian*.

"It is," she said, "considered suitable reading for gentlemen."

"Have you read it yourself?" enquired the young man.

"No," said Mary. "We shall be so much obliged if, when you have read it, you will give us an account of the story. My aunt often asks a subscriber to aid her in this way."

When the young man had gone, taking the book and a bewildered air away with him, Miss Martin looked up from her embroidery frame.

"Now, Mary, I think we can *safely* close for the afternoon. What made you choose Professor Aytoun's satire to recommend to young Mr. Tom Grimthorpe?"

"I think," said Mary, "it will take him almost three weeks to read it, and my aunt will be here when he returns it, to advise him further."

But Mr. Tom Grimthorpe was not the only unexpected invader of the library, and he, to do him justice, had come at a quiet hour and had been altogether charming in the humility of his attitude towards the resources of Miss Martin's bookshelves and the courtesy with which he presented his petition to Miss Martin's young assistant. Another

and a far less peaceful invasion had occurred earlier in the week.

They had all reckoned without Georgina. Ettie, who had already transferred her devotion from the daily Mary to the occasional James Towyn, with an intermittent throw-back of her undeveloped fancy for that Clara, noticed no objectionable change on Monday morning when Mamma took her to the morning-room and gave a box of moist paints and a brush into her control—a triumphant if messy way of avoiding a scene.

But Georgina, sent out driving with the Rector as a special treat on Monday, was not so easily compensated for Miss Paradise's failure to appear on Tuesday morning.

"Holidays, Georgie! Summer holidays! You are going to the seaside with little Rosamund. To-morrow we are going to Troubridge to buy you a bathing-dress and some sand-shoes."

"But I haven't finished reading *Médor et Blanchette* with Miss Paradise."

"You can come and read it with me this afternoon."

"I can't. It's Miss Paradise's book, and she has taken it home to gum in the picture of the parents that Ettie pulled out on Friday."

"Well, we'll read *Ministering Children* instead."

"I've read that. And it is not a French book. And we've come to an exciting part. *I must finish Médor et Blanchette.*"

"But you are having holidays, Georgina."

"I don't want holidays. I want Miss Paradise to go on being my governess. When will the holidays stop?"

"After you come back from the sea. And then you are to go to school—in London."

Georgina regarded her stepmother with the hard stare of disapproval that was her most effective weapon in contests of this kind.

"I don't want to go to school," she said. "I won't go to school."

NS

"Oh, you'll like it very much," Madeleine assured her, adding weakly, "Besides, it is a long time till September."

Georgina turned on her heel and went upstairs, kicking each stair-rod as she mounted. When she reached the landing, she leaned over the balustrade and called down into the hall below :

"I am going to finish reading *Médor et Blanchette*."

But Madeleine had gone into the morning-room, and did not hear her.

Ten minutes later, Georgina, wearing her hat well on the back of her head and carrying her copy-book and pencil-box under one arm, flounced in through the open door of the library and emporium and announced to the half-dozen people assembled there that she was come to do her lessons. The sensation she created was very soothing to her feelings.

Mary, who was coming down the step-ladder with her arms filled with books, paused half-way and nearly let the books fall to the ground. Miss Martin, putting on her stronger pair of spectacles in order to examine more closely the coloured pattern for an embroidered tea-cosy for which the two Miss Lindens were choosing wools, drew in her chin and pushed her spectacles up on her forehead in order to see across the hall more clearly. The four customers forgot their books and the patterns in which they had been engrossed, and turned to stare with the most gratifying interest at Georgina, who stood in their midst half angry, half pleased, but quite sure of what she wanted.

"I won't have holidays," she proclaimed in the silence she had created. "I want to finish *Médor et Blanchette*, and to have my music-lesson on Miss Martin's piano."

It was Miss Martin who took command of the situation. One quick look at Mary Paradise had been enough. The girl's eyes had filled with tears. Her lips were trembling. She had, Miss Martin saw, felt all the implications of the situation she was facing with so much cheerfulness and dignity. Miss Martin's heart warmed to the naughty

Georgina. The child seemed to be the only person in the Rectory capable of proper feeling. But the softening of her heart did not mitigate the austerity of her conduct. Placing the drawer of coloured wools on the table where the patterns were spread out, she invited the two ladies to make their own selection while, without taking her eyes off the little girl's face, she changed her spectacles and restored the stronger glasses to their case, shutting it with a snap loud enough to make Georgina jump. The child watched her, fascinated and already a little nervous under the protracted gaze.

Miss Martin, still keeping her eyes fixed on Georgina's, withdrew to the other side of the stove.

"Come here, Georgina," she said.

The little girl walked across the hall; Mary Paradise came down from her ladder and laid the books she was carrying on the long table; the Misses Linden, recovering their good manners, became engrossed in the examination of coloured woollen skeins; and Miss Martin, in the partial seclusion she had sought, dealt with the invader.

"Does your Mamma know you have come here?" was her first question.

"She's my *stepmother*," protested the child, attempting a gambit that served well with Clara and even with Nurse in moments of stress.

"That is no reason for leaving the house without her permission," said Miss Martin, jumping with accuracy to the conclusion Georgina had tried to avoid, "or for trying to interrupt Miss Paradise while she is busy."

"Miss Paradise is *my* governess," Georgina urged jealously.

"Not at all." Miss Martin drew in her chin and looked down at Georgina over the tops of her spectacles. "Miss Paradise has been promoted to be assistant librarian. She is going to be far too busy to give lessons to little girls."

"Not even music-lessons?" pleaded Georgina.

"Not in the holidays," countered Miss Martin.

"Horrid holidays," Georgina cried. "Disagreeable holidays. I want to finish *Médor et Blanchette*."

Georgina's gift of importunity seldom failed her. Mary, who had satisfied her subscribers, was now free to enter the discussion. She ran across the floor and knelt by the protesting figure of the little girl, her wide skirts ballooning around them both, so that all that could be seen of them was two flushed and earnest faces rising out of a cloud of lilac gingham.

"You shall finish it, Georgie," Mary promised. "I will fetch the book for you now. It shall be my good-bye present to you."

"For my own, to keep?" said Georgina.

"For your very own—a keepsake for you to take away to school."

"I don't want to go to school," Georgina wailed, and her tears began to fall at last.

"But you must," cried Mary, and her tears flowed as well, till the lilac balloon was starred with bright drops that dissolved and made little dark patches on its stripes.

Miss Martin fumbled in the black satin pochette that hung from her waist and produced a large, cool linen handkerchief.

"There now," she said, wiping Georgina's crimson cheeks. "We can't have *tears* during business hours. I am going to fetch Matilda to take you home again at once, before they have time to miss you. She shall carry a note to ask your Mamma if you can come to tea this afternoon and play on my piano."

But when Miss Martin came back with her note, and Mary had gone upstairs to fetch the little French book with its coloured pictures of cat and dog and tutor and governess, Georgina declined the invitation.

"It won't be any good," she boasted. "Mr. Towyn is coming to tea and I want to see him. I am to tell him that Miss Paradise is now engaged in the library every day from nine to three."

3

It must now be faced that Miss Martin, though she told Lena all her own impressions of the little scene with Georgina on Monday, and though, later in the week, she kept back no detail of Mary's encounter with young Mr. Grimthorpe, said no word of Georgina's vainglorious indiscretion. Whether in the bustle of hurrying the child back before she could be missed, and of keeping an eye on the fish-kettle in which Matilda was cooking a halibut for their dinner, she forgot the announcement, or whether, as is more probable, the reserve that had already sprung up between them in regard to Lady Gervaise and her son was strong enough to compel her silence, the result was the same. Lena was not aware that any message had been sent to the young man, whom she believed to be away from the Castle by now. Indeed, by Thursday afternoon, seeing that Mary's spirits were untroubled, and that she showed no sign of fretting or depression, Lena found herself speculating with Miss Martin on the possible consequences of young Grimthorpe's interest.

Not that the two ladies discussed anything of the kind openly. It would have savoured of the vulgarity of match-making, in Miss Martin's opinion, even to admit that Mary had reached a marriageable age. But she did go so far as to suggest that, as young Mr. Grimthorpe had already brought back *Firmilian*, read from cover to cover, and had asked for *Lallah Rookh*, it would be interesting to see whether his taste for poetry lasted when Lena herself resumed her control of the library.

"He discussed Professor Aytoun's satire for quite ten minutes with Mary, although she told him she had never read it herself, and did not know what it was about."

"It is not always the best way to put an end to a discussion to admit ignorance of the subject the other person has chosen to talk about," said Lena. "I think, if Mr. Grimthorpe persists in his desire to talk about poetry, it will save

time and comment if we ask him to take tea with us when he has finished whatever poem Mary may next choose for him."

"She spoke of *The Excursion*."

"*The Excursion* is a serious undertaking. The young man will need to apply himself to it if he is to discuss it at length," said Lena.

Miss Martin looked at her.

"*Lallah Rookh*, on the other hand," she pronounced, "is an entirely *frivolous* poem."

"I quite agree," said Lena.

But she knew that what they both meant had nothing whatever to do with the comparative frivolity of the poems they named.

Lena was comforted by the thought that a counter-attraction might save Mary's heart from setting out too far for recall on a hopeless sea. Young Tom Grimthorpe, handsome, well connected, the heir to a small estate on the Beaton Clarence side of the valley, had, she knew, been considered by Lady Dale as a suitable husband for one of the Seymour twins. He would be more than a good match for little Mary Paradise. They would, indeed, have to face the nine days' wonder the preliminaries for such a marriage would stir throughout the Beatons. This young man's wooing, if it should prosper, was the most natural, the happiest solution to the general problem of Mary's future and to the particular difficulty in which at present she seemed to be involved. Lena had no hesitation with herself as to matchmaking for this perilously lovely and unprotected niece who had already disturbed the even course of the life she had been obliged to share. She thanked the stars that seemed to be guiding them through the pitfalls it was her ardent purpose to avoid, and began to consider ways of promoting the new interest that was offered already to Mary's consideration, scheming to make things as easy for Tom Grimthorpe as they must be difficult, impossible even, for James Towyn.

In this way, stilling the deeper conviction of trouble that was already inevitable and near, Lena passed a day and a night of comparative freedom from anxiety. On Friday morning, soon after eleven o'clock, she was interrupted in her work by Miss Martin, who put a bonneted head round the study door and announced in a voice that quivered with excitement :

" I am just stepping down to the Square for ten minutes, Lena, to obtain some mucilage for Mrs. Bartram's footstool covers. No one is in the library at present, and Mary has promised to attend to anyone who may come in."

Lena looked up from the catalogue and smiled.

" Very well, Christie," she said. " Tell Mary to call me if she wants any help before you return."

She worked on for some minutes, conscious of a tinge of apprehension in her affectionate amusement as she thought how pleased and fluttered little Christie was at last. There had been no need for her to ask if the Castle gates were open again. Nothing but the assurance that Lady Gervaise, after an absence of six months, was once again about to be driven down High Street would have sent Miss Martin tripping down to the Square in the middle of the morning on an errand Matilda, or even Mary, could have done for her.

Presently, needing to verify some reference in her notes on the small collection of theological books that was housed in a couple of shelves in the gallery, she laid down her pen and went upstairs. Mary, seated at the long table in the hall below, was making entries in the day-book, and did not hear Lena's footstep on the drugget of the gallery floor. Having found the title-page she wanted, Lena paused for a moment to look down into the hall.

The crossing sunlight coming through the glass panes and the open door made a net in which Mary's head and shoulders were caught, so that seen from above, her smooth hair and delicate bent neck showed like the carved and painted image of some Gothic angel writing with a huge white quill the record of a holy tale.

A wandering hermit bee buzzed in from the garden, and made a humming accompaniment to the high squeak of Mary's pen. The kitchen cat stepped among the geranium pots in the porch and flicked its whiskers, purring in the heat. The faint sounds moved on the surface of the moving stillness but did not trouble its industrious peace. Miss Quibell lingered, watching the quiet scene. Her heart was filled with delight. She stood there deep in the core of a physical happiness that held her still and breathless and content. The gliding sound of Mary's pen ; the slow droning of the velvet bee that criss-crossed through the shafts of sunlight ; the steady, trembling purr of the cat's beatitude, bemused her mind and made her senses captive to the enchantment of the midsummer day.

She leant on the rail of the gallery, bending over the hall. A healing sense of benediction flowing through her and from her made her one with what she saw and heard. Thus in self-forgetfulness she stood and reached that peace that will for a moment reward the onlooker : but even as she found it it was broken.

A quick footfall on the pavement outside disturbed the silence of Castle Gate. The movement of Mary's pen slackened ; she turned her head to the door that stood open to the street. Someone was coming into the library.

Even before he crossed the threshold, Lena knew who this visitor must be. The confusion of the light hid him from her as he entered, but Mary's face was her key. It shone with that light that is lit once and for one only—the unfaltering radiance of a first and overwhelming passion. As he passed out of the blinding sun-shafts and came up to the table, carrying his hat in one hand, Lena saw the answering look on the young man's face. His blue eyes were wide and dark with excitement ; the melancholy curve of his mouth was broken by a smile so compelling that Lena felt her own heart go out to him, captured by its charm. In one swift glance she took in the grace and proportion of his slenderness, set off by the cut of his pale grey summer suit

and the flowing of the loose bow that tied the open collar of his soft shirt. She saw how the fair hair paled to an almost silvery gold on the temples and at the turn of the close-cropped curls. She saw the young arrogance of the head, its noble movement as he turned it, bending in a quick salute. The low murmur of his voice as he greeted Mary, who had risen and had come to meet him half way across the hall, stirred in Lena's blood. She was filled with an intolerable acquiescence, a blinding pity. How could Mary, how could any woman, resist the appeal he was now so clearly making to her? He had found her again after a week that must have been an eternity of separation for both of them. She could not bear to watch their meeting. Trembling with tear-stung eyes, she crept away. The movement of her soft skirts made no sound that could reach them; her retreating footsteps were unheard. She went, a ghost of autumn, flying from the high realities of a spring that has come to the season of flowers.

4

"The only way," said Miss Martin, "is to prevent its happening again. Mary must take round the Mudie books. They will be here by the carrier's van this afternoon."

There had been no need for Lena to tell her friend of what she had seen. Miss Martin, returning flushed and happy from her bow, had found the young man in the library.

"Mary introduced him," she said, "and he explained that he had ventured to call on Miss Paradise to make his adieux. I asked him at once when he was leaving the Castle, and he said not for a few days. Of course, he may not *intend* to call again, but we cannot risk his being seen here to-morrow, or on Monday when *everybody* will be in for the new books."

"If we send Mary out, she may meet him and be seen speaking with him."

"Not in the drive of Queen's Beaton Place, or on Dr.

MacFarlane's *doorstep*, Lena. Besides, he is not to know where she is gone. We will not tell Mary till the books are all sorted. Also," Miss Martin concluded, "I shall send Matilda with her, to *carry* the parcels. Mary cannot manage them by herself. She will take at least two days to deliver them all. They had better begin by going out to Colt's Wood to-morrow morning, while the fine weather holds. It is bound to break within the next day or so."

The fine weather justified Miss Martin's opinion of it by breaking on Monday morning in a soft downpour that pitted the dust of Castle Gate, and drummed gently on the dark leaves of the great horse-chestnut in the churchyard. Lena, wakened by the sound, went to the opened lattice of her window and leaned out, breathing the freshness of the rain-soaked garden. It was still early. The church clock had struck the hour in five hesitating notes just before Lena rose from her bed. The falling rain seemed like the visible voice of solitude making the silence of the morning deeper by its hushing murmur. As she stood bending her head under the low framework of the window Lena saw a movement to the left of the outward opening lattice. Mary also was awake, five yards away from her, leaning out, holding her hands palm upward to catch the raindrops as they fell. She bent over the ivy-grown window-sill and, cupping her hands, dipped her face in the fresh water, washing eyes and chin in the soft vessel of her curving fingers. Lena watched her as she repeated the gesture, and thought she detected a fevered thirst quenching the parched drought of sleepless hours in the grey benediction of the morning rain.

"Mary," she called softly, "Mary dear."

But the double barrier of the leaded windows that opened between them shut off her voice. Once more the girl's hands stretched out to gather the cool water: but before she could bury her face in them again Lena withdrew. She had caught Psyche at some dewy waking rite on which she could spy no longer. Mary's secret, an open secret now,

was guarded as jealously by Lena, who had discovered it, as it had been by the girl's own silence that still preserved it from the ruin of confession.

At ten o'clock Mary, wearing a round cloak that covered her from chin to ankle, her skirts drawn in festoons above the tops of her black buttoned boots, set off through the rain with six books in a basket slung over her arm. She carried a large green silk umbrella, and was followed by Matilda with two more baskets, one over each arm, and with no umbrella to protect her brown straw hat and yellow cross-over from the downpour that grew less heavy from hour to hour.

It had been decided, in view of the rain, that the new books should be distributed and the old ones collected in the town only. Some twenty houses had to be visited, and this, Miss Martin calculated, would take the whole morning, even if Mary were not detained by the delay of some subscriber in finding the book that must be sent back to Mudie's on the following morning, or held in conversation by others who might intercept her on her round.

At a quarter to eleven Matilda returned alone, bringing ten books back with her.

"Where have you left Miss Mary?" questioned Miss Martin, who was shelling peas in the kitchen when Matilda came in.

"Down in Church Lane. The gentlemen sent me home."

"Which gentlemen? How many gentlemen?" gasped Miss Martin.

"Two of them. One is carrying the books and the other has the umberellia," said Matilda. "And they both look over Miss Mary's head as cross as two sticks," she added. "I did laff to see them."

"Lena," said Miss Martin, hurrying into the library, where she found her friend alone for the moment, "The worst has happened. Mr. James Towyn and young Tom Grimthorpe are carrying the books and Mary's umbrella

for her. They have sent Matilda home. They are all in Church Lane at this very moment. What is to be done ? ”

“ Nothing can be done,” said Lena, and then she burst out into laughter in a most unusual way. “ Oh,” she gasped, leaning back in her chair. “ The young monkey ! Both of them ! ” And she laughed again until Miss Martin very nearly laughed with her.

“ Stop, Lena,” she cried. “ It is no laughing matter. The young men are about to quarrel. If there should be a *duel* ! ” Every curl on the little lady’s head quivered with the emphasis she gave to the dreadful word.

But Lena could not be frightened by this imagination. “ They are not schoolboys,” she said. “ They will not fight ; but we must not allow Mary to take out the rest of the books.”

“ What are we to do with her ? ”

“ We shall have to send her away if Mr. Towyn does not go himself to-morrow, as he told you he would.”

“ It is all extremely complicated,” sighed Miss Martin.

“ Very, *very* complicated indeed.”

“ Let us hope that it is such a wet morning no one will meet them.” Lena was recovering from her sudden and untimely mirth. She was beginning to share Miss Martin’s concern.

“ Nothing will stop Matilda from talking to the MacFarlane’s cook about it. It would only be adding disobedience to her other faults to forbid her to do so. Indeed, so far as I can make out, she has already mentioned it to the butcher’s boy, whom she met on the way home, and that comes to the same thing. It will be all over Queen’s Beaton by now.”

Miss Martin’s estimate of the publicity commanded by the butcher’s boy was confirmed in a very few hours. By half-past two the procession of umbrellas bobbing up High Street to Castle Gate was met by the returning ranks of those bobbing their way down again. There was not a moment of the afternoon when less than three customers or

subscribers were in the library at once. Miss Martin, who had always divided feminine humanity into "ladies and *not*," was obliged to rearrange her division of the ladies of Queen's Beaton in more than one instance. For, though most of them came or sent their daughters up the hill on some pretext or other, it was astonishing to find that those who had been placed long ago in the ladies' class so far forgot themselves as to ask questions about, or to make direct reference to, the morning's news; while others, just as surprisingly, affected to ignore it. Mary herself, secluded in the parlour, was engaged in embroidering the quasi-algebraic formula $C.M. : L.Q.$ on a set of new towels and sheets. She sat there amid the snowy heaps, a coloured print of three complete cross-stitch alphabets propped against a photograph-frame in front of her, drawing the crimson thread through the woven fabric in minute, regular stitches, and smiling a little now and then at the thoughts that peopled her seclusion.

The library did not close until four o'clock that afternoon, and when at last Mary was summoned to tea it was with two exasperated and tired companions that she sat down to table.

For the first time since she had come to live there she was treated with constraint. The ladies were annoyed, not only with her, but with themselves. They had allowed this situation to develop, to get out of hand. It was too late to rebuke Mary for a circumstance for which she was not entirely to blame. They had sent her out in the rain, burdened with parcels, and two gentlemen had, with natural politeness, relieved her of these. No girl could be expected to refuse the offer of such aid. The most they could reproach her with was that she had allowed Matilda to return. And her answer to this was perfect. "I knew you could not really spare Matilda, Aunt Christie."

She had been quite frank about the incident. Mr. Grimthorpe had come out of the saddler's shop while she was holding the basket for Matilda to take out Mrs. Morton's

books and had taken it from her, and, while they were talking, Mr. Towyn had passed and had taken her umbrella. It was Mr. Towyn who had suggested that Matilda might go home.

"I did not think I might contradict him," said Mary, and again left Miss Martin without an answer.

5

The next day Mary was re-instated in the library. Very few people were likely to come in, after yesterday's throng. Queen's Beaton had exhausted every literary or industrious pretext on the previous day. Lena herself undertook to collect the few books that still had to be garnered for despatch that afternoon, and to deliver the half-dozen still left over from Mary's undertaking.

The morning passed quietly enough. The ladies had more or less recovered their equanimity. Mary's escapade was no longer under discussion. They all three tried to behave as though it had not occurred. But beneath the surface there was trouble and anxiety. Lena and Miss Martin had agreed that they must not let Mary out of their sight until they were assured that Mr. Towyn was really gone from the Castle, and that a watch would have to be placed on her correspondence for some time thereafter.

"It is no use asking Mary to promise not to write to him, as we cannot exact the same promise from Mr. Towyn," said Miss Martin, "We cannot encourage deception," she added, after a pause, leaving Miss Quibell to make what she could of this rather double-edged remark.

So Lena went back to her catalogue and Miss Martin settled down to her embroidery, while Mary put the books Lena had brought back into the Mudie box, and checked its contents and filled in the return forms and added a few fresh titles to those already on the list for the October sending.

It wanted ten minutes of one when Lena was interrupted by an even more than usually agitated Miss Martin.

"The gates are open *again*," she announced, without any attempt to cloak her design with any useful purpose. "Had you better go into the library until I return?"

Lena laid down her pen.

"You will be late for dinner, Christie," she expostulated.

Miss Martin gazed at her friend in hurt perplexity. It was the first time Lena had hinted at any frustration of this tacitly recognised necessity. It was, too, the first time Miss Martin's own impulse to go out to meet the Malquoits barouche had been mixed with any hindering consideration. In the flush of a second thought she was almost grateful to Lena for giving her own new reluctance a reason she could name.

"That is so," she agreed. "It is not a *usual* hour."

She lingered for a moment. Before she had time to speak of her hesitation or to quell it there was the quick, hollow noise of carriage horses on the stones of Castle Gate. They clopped proudly for a few paces, and then, before either Lena or Christie could decide how to speak of their significance, came a trampling pause. Through the open window a faint scent of horses, the jingle of silver harness, the swift grit of a man's boot on the ground, conveyed to their astonished ears that the equipage had halted at the garden gate. The click of the latch confirmed the event. Heavy footsteps crunched the gravel of the path to the front door. Lena knew that Miss Martin was resisting an almost invincible impulse to peep out of the open window. Every curl on her head quivered. Then, with a gesture in which the standards of a governed existence proclaimed their victory, she closed the door, left open when she entered, and advanced two steps into the room. The door bell tinkled : every note of its tintinabulation knocked at Lena's heart as Miss Martin's suspense and excitement communicated themselves to her. There was an eternity of silence between the last faint tremble of the bell and the sound of Matilda's footsteps as she went down the passage to answer it.

"*Has she changed her apron?*" whispered Miss Martin, hoarse with doubt.

"I think so. She did not rush at once," said Lena, her own tongue a little stiff in her mouth as she spoke.

Then Matilda was at the door.

"It's the groom," she said. "He says Lady Gervaise Towyn presents her compliments and could Miss Martin and Miss Quibell find it convenient to see her for a few moments?"

It was Lena who answered, bidding Matilda show the visitor into the parlour.

"Come, Christie," she said, as Matilda trudged back to the door, "we must both be in the room when she arrives."

"Though I have not had the pleasure of meeting Miss Quibell until to-day," said Lady Gervaise, with a graciousness that seemed to come oddly from her erect and hawk-like person, "I have ventured to call on her as well as on you, Miss Martin, because I feel that she too may be able to help me to discharge a small service I have been asked to render to a friend."

She sat in the arm-chair by the window facing the two ladies who had taken their places opposite her; Lena by the table, Christie in her accustomed seat by the fireplace, now rustling with its summer waterfall of white and gilt paper shavings.

"Anything I can do . . ." Lena murmured, lost in wonder at this unexpected appeal.

"I have never forgotten how Miss Martin came to my aid many years ago now," the lady went on, and Lena's wonder deepened to dismay. Beneath the soaring kindness of her words there must crouch some purpose of another nature more in tune with the glitter of the dark, fierce eyes that watched her so narrowly.

But Christie could only smile. Her soft cheeks were flushed with pleasure; the wrinkles of her dear little face were smoothed away in the beatitude of the moment. She

had taken off her spectacles, and her dimming eyes shone with a light that matched the sudden youthfulness of her whole bearing. Lady Gervaise was here, seated in her parlour, remembering the days Christie had never forgotten. The birthday of her life was come.

"The matter is simple enough, and yet in a way rather delicate," Lady Gervaise went on. "My brother-in-law, Lord Thomas Towyn, has just been appointed aide-de-camp to the Governor-General of New Zealand, in place of Mr. Porchester, so unfortunately drowned in the spring. He is to travel out in a few weeks' time, and Lady Blaise Marchant, who is out there, has asked me if I can recommend a young person who might make the voyage on the same ship and travel under the same escort, in order to take up the post of English governess to her daughters."

There was a pause. Lady Gervaise looked from one of her listeners to the other. The two ladies exchanged glances. Neither of them spoke.

"The post," Lady Gervaise continued with increasing suavity, "is in every way desirable. It is, I need hardly say, only to be offered to a young person of the most unexceptionable character and attainments. Lady Blaise requires, most particularly, singing as well as the piano. Also good conversational French. I have her letter with me."

There was another pause while Lady Gervaise extracted the letter from her pochette and swung out the glasses of her tortoiseshell lorgnon.

"The emolument offered is handsome," she continued, after smoothing out the letter she held with the end of the long handle of her eyeglasses, "and the return journey is, of course, assured at the end of the engagement."

"Would it be a long engagement?" Lena enquired.

Lady Gervaise did not look at her. Affecting to consult the letter in her hand, she turned its pages slowly.

"Three years," she said at last, without lowering her eyeglass.

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"I have been told," ventured Miss Christina, "that conditions there are slightly—unsettled."

"They are much improved. The past four years has worked wonders. Lady Blaise writes with enthusiasm of the natural beauties of the island. She is a great sportswoman, and organises expeditions—under suitable escort, of course—to points of interest—the Pink Terraces. You have heard of the Pink Terraces, Miss Quibell?"

Lena had heard of the Pink Terraces. She had also heard of Maori risings; but of these she forbore to speak. Lady Gervaise was clearly bent on looking on the brighter side of New Zealand life.

"The climate is delightful—and salubrious," she went on, a slightly dictatorial note creeping into her voice, as though she were alive to what Miss Quibell was not saying and was forbidding her to say it. "And, of course, life in Government circles is attended with every advantage."

"That certainly would make a *difference*," agreed Miss Martin, and Lena knew she was referring to the Maori.

"Lady Blaise tells me that the governess who went out with them has made a very good marriage. It is this circumstance, fortunate for the young lady herself, that is obliging her to send to England for a successor."

Lady Gervaise paused. She had come to the end of her statement. She seemed to be waiting for a suggestion. None was forthcoming. After a moment's silence, Miss Martin cleared her throat on a high soprano note, as it to indicate that she was ready to answer any question her visitor might have to put, though unable to volunteer any remark of her own.

The lady turned her deep-set eyes on Miss Martin's countenance, which had now lost its transitory air of youth and was looking a little puzzled and care-worn.

"I had hoped," said Lady Gervaise, "that you might be able to help me to find such a young person as I have described."

Miss Martin grew pale to the lips. She drew in her chin

and lifted her hand twice in a feeble gesture as of involuntary protest. Lena saw it. What was this jest of Fate that had put little Christie into this predicament, that she must refuse the person she most wished to serve the only service she had ever required of her? Could Lena herself exact it of Christie—this denial of an offer that would save them all from a situation prolonged already beyond the point where they should have dealt with it themselves? It was not fair to take her by surprise like this; to demand Mary's banishment so blandly—at the point of a hidden but unsheathed sword. Quickly, to gain time, Lena answered for her.

"If I were free: if I were younger," she faltered. "The experience is one I should very much enjoy. Unfortunately, I am tied here. Besides," she added, after a slight pause, smiling a little, "I do not sing."

The faint shock to Lady Gervaise Towyn's self-possession visible while Lena was speaking was evidence enough, had such been needed, of the real object of her visit.

"Ah, Miss Quibell," she replied, with a fiercer gleam in her bright eyes, "that would indeed have been an answer. But Lady Blaise would never dream of suggesting that anyone of your attainments and position should undertake so long a journey to fill so comparatively unimportant a post. Such undertakings are for the young. My brother-in-law has been chosen as the youngest attaché. No older man would consider the appointment—no man of his rank and qualifications, I mean. It was in the hope that you knew of some quite young person who might be willing to travel, who had some little experience of travel, that I applied to you."

This time there was no pause. Miss Martin had recovered her power of speech. The colour had returned to her cheeks; she sat upright, her hands clasped in her lap.

"I am sorry to disappoint your ladyship," she said, and her voice was clear though her words were incoherent. "But we know, neither of us knows—there is no such person known to either Miss Quibell, or to *anybody*."

Lady Gervaise began to make the small collecting movements that indicated her intention to rise from her seat. She closed her lorgnon, returned the letter to her pochette, drew her lace shawl about her shoulders, took up the parasol that had lain across her lap while she talked, with its ivory jointed handle folded.

"I am sorry to have occupied so much of your time in vain," she said. "Perhaps, when you have thought it over, some name may occur to you."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Martin eagerly. "We will think. We may hear of the very thing. But suddenly, like this . . ."

"There is very little time to be lost," said Lady Gervaise, rising to her feet, "I had hoped to be able to write to-day that all was arranged."

"I am sorry, but that is impossible," said Lena.

"Since neither of you knows any such young person," said Lady Gervaise coldly, "I shall have to take other steps."

"I am sure your ladyship will be successful," said Lena. She stood, one hand on the table to support her lest by trembling she should weaken the challenge hidden in her speech.

At that moment the door opened, and Mary ran lightly into the room. She stood facing the morning sunlight, dazzled by it, so that she did not see the visitor in the shadow on one side of the window.

"Aunt Lena," she said, "Mr. Grimthorpe wishes to exchange his book. I thought I should let you know."

Then, aware of the constraint her entrance had caused, and seeing the third figure in the shadow, she drew a quick breath, and the rose flush deepened on her cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said, dropping a little curtsey to the stranger. "I thought you and Aunt Christie were alone."

Lena nodded to the girl, bidding her withdraw, but Lady Gervaise was too quick for her.

"One moment," she said, asserting the undisputed

authority of a lifetime. "I should like a word with your niece, Miss Quibell."

Mary closed the door behind her and came into the room, standing by Lena's side.

"It is Lady Gervaise Towyn, Mary." Lena took the girl's cold hand, and led her a step forward. "My niece, Mary Paradise," she said.

For a moment Lady Gervaise was silent. Whatever she had been prepared for, this flower-like beauty, this delicate and gentle poise, had taken her by surprise.

"I have called on your aunts," she said at last, "with a suggestion I think they will now lay before you. I advise you, for your own sake, to accept it."

Mary looked wonderingly at Lena, who avoided her glance. She turned to Miss Martin. The little lady was putting on her spectacles, as though they were armour. She drew in her chin, until her shoulders almost touched the grey curls that vibrated on each side of her head. Her eyes behind her glasses sparkled with a mischievous triumph.

"It is out of the question," she pronounced. "Mary is going to live with an aunt in Shropshire."

"I did not say *her* aunt, Lena ; I said *an* aunt. I was referring to my own aunt, Mrs. Pristy, who has a farm outside Ludlow. She is my mother's youngest sister, a year older than myself."

"I did not know," said Lena. "You never speak of her."

"I have always called her Cousin Lydia. It seemed less ridiculous."

"Oh," said Lena, "Cousin Lydia of High Vinnals."

"Three miles from the high road, seven from Ludlow. Very difficult to find, even in summer. They send everything to market in their own carts, and bring back the letters twice a week."

"What would Mrs. Pristy do with Mary ? What could Mary do for occupation, or to make herself useful ?"

"She could learn to make butter and *cheese*," said Miss

Martin, "and to spin. One winter, when I was a child, I stayed there, and I distinctly remember spinning-wheels at night. They spin yarn from the wool of their own sheep. My own bed," Miss Martin concluded "is stuffed with down from the High Vinnals geese."

"Could she keep Mary through the winter?"

"Half measures," said Miss Martin, "are worse than useless. I shall write to Cousin Lydia to-night. I have promised for years to pay her a visit."

CHAPTER VII

LENA

I

The rain was over. It came and went through the first week of August, and then vanished, leaving the sky clear above an earth greener, and an air cooler, for its fall. Queen's Beaton was deep in its midsummer drowsiness. The Rectory was given over to the leisurely care of those servants who remained behind when Madeleine and the Rector, with Georgie, Nurse, and Ettie and a maid with them, joined the rest of the family party at the sea. The Squire and Mrs. Bartram were in Switzerland. Dr. and Mrs. MacFarlane had taken their annual trip to Aberdeen. The lodge-keeper at the park gates beyond Queen Street was seen in his shirt-sleeves at mid-day, a sure sign that no one of the family or household remained at the Castle. For more than three days now no book had been exchanged at the library. Such business as the emporium transacted was done by post, in the form of letters of advice to needleworking ladies away from home, who had forgotten whether a slip or satin stitch was to be employed on the slippers and antimacassars they had taken away for their holiday employment, or who found their supplies of Berlin wool or shaded crewels running short. But the Chantry House was full of employment in spite of the midsummer sleepiness.

Mrs. Pristy's answer had arrived ten days ago. She had extended a ready hospitality to Cousin Christina and her quasi-niece, only hoping the young lady would not find life at High Vinnals dull or rough after the ease and bustle of Queen's Beaton. She suggested that they should wait for

the full moon before starting. They could not reach Shrewsbury by train until the late afternoon, and the drive to High Vinnals from the station along the unlighted country roads would take three good hours under the most favourable conditions.

And now Mary's little black hair-covered trunk stood, strapped and labelled, in the hall beside Miss Martin's smaller box, ready for the carrier who was to fetch them in the morning so that they might find their luggage waiting for them at Shrewsbury when they arrived there early next week.

Lena had superintended the selection of the clothes Mary would need through the coming autumn and winter, and had helped Christina with the delicate work of washing and ironing the innumerable sets of lawn and muslin collars, cuffs, and frills that were the indispensable adjuncts of every gown she owned. She had not failed to remark, as the preparations for Mary's departure reached their completion, how, daily, the girl's spirits sank, until on the day before the journey she was scarcely able to keep back her tears. She went listlessly about the house, doing the last small offices of her usual duties, with pale face and downcast eyes and lips that trembled before any speech came from them. She had accepted her sentence of banishment without surprise or protest. Indeed, for two or three days after Lady Gervaise's visit Mary had been buoyed by the same inner excitement as had carried her through the waking dream of the past two months. Lena thought this elation seemed actually to increase in intensity for a time, as though Mary were in hourly expectation of some culminating miracle, some justification of, or rescue from, the plight in which she waited. But as the days went by, and no interruption from outside disturbed the busy progress of her coming removal from Queen's Beaton, Mary's hope had dwindled and died. Nothing but her courage remained to see her through the final stages of its extinction. Lena, seeing her suffer, was aware of a rising anger against the author of this

pain. Lady Gervaise's threat of "other steps" had evidently been carried out with more success than had met her attempt to send Mary to the Antipodes. But if it had been so easy to cut James Towyn off from the little governess with whom he had amused himself too openly, why had his mother not done so without exposing herself to the risk of the defeat she had encountered? Perhaps it had not been so easy: perhaps Lady Gervaise had preferred to attempt a direct attack on Mary's position before resorting to some subterfuge or some prevarication the use of which must have been repugnant to her pride. Or perhaps, thought Lena at last, with a sudden pang of shame, Lady Gervaise, too, had been driven to exert *force majeure* even as they had done, and to send her son into an even swifter exile than that to which she and Christie had condemned the girl who had lost her heart to him. It was a desperate business, groping in her mind for the key to a situation only half of which was under her control. She was still unable to discuss it freely with Miss Martin, who, in her own way, was almost as depressed as Mary. It would be a long time, Lena realised, before poor little Christie could recover from the wound her own fantastic heart had suffered when she had forced herself to deny her idol the demanded sacrifice.

And now the Castle was deserted, the doors in the high, bleak wall that fenced it from the town were barred, and, just outside them, two foolish creatures who had allowed their wandering dreams to be caught by the unresponding powers that had fled even from their fast security suffered the pangs of a desertion against which there was no appeal.

Lena was not without her moments of indignation against Christie, who had, after all, thrown, as it were, half a sacrifice on the altar. Christie had rebelled against the idea of sending Mary to Auckland. Her conversation was now liable at any moment to the invasion of aborigines—"savages," she called them—and to frightful excerpts from *Captain Cook's Voyages*. She had taken the book from the

library on the day after Lady Gervaise's call, and it lay on the parlour table, the visible reinforcement of her defiance. But Mrs. Pristy of High Vinnals had been brought to the rescue, quite as much of Christie's own passion as of Mary's threatened virtue. Why, Lena asked herself, could they not have joined forces and faced the enemy squarely? Why not have kept Mary with them, and done battle for her happiness in the home they had made for her; the place where she was entitled to look for, and to find, protection and defence? The answer lay in the complexities of the still ambiguous situation of which Miss Martin's own share was not admitted and that of James Towyn remained undeclared. It was best to dismiss him as a heartless trifler, and to regard Mary as a convalescent they were sending to complete a recovery by means of a change of air. So Lena argued with herself as she stitched the lawn frilling along the wide sleeves of Mary's gowns, or pushed the tip of a shining flat-iron into the scallops of the small embroidered collars or thin lace edgings of Christie's best cuffs. Mary's own behaviour during the past days had helped to bring the questioning of Christie's decision more into the fore-ground of Lena's thoughts. For, with the dimming of her unspoken rapture, Mary had betrayed a new and disarming gentleness, and had shown, by many small signs and wistful efforts to obey and please, an almost deprecating increase of affection for both the elder ladies. After the first brief explicit scene in which Lena had told her that, in view of Mr. James Towyn's attentions, it seemed better that she should leave Queen's Beaton, lest, when he returned to Malquoits for the shooting in the autumn, she might find herself the subject of gossip and unkind surmise, no direct reference to the real purpose of her journey was made by either of the ladies. The situation was once more shrouded in that reserve Miss Martin insisted on, and Lena herself recognised as proper, in dealing with so very delicate a theme as an incipient love-affair between young persons of unequal rank. There was a verge, over which, even in imagination, Miss Martin refused

to look. The word "danger" that Lena might have spoken was withheld from utterance by Christie's agitated and apparent determination that no such thing existed. After the first day or two, Miss Martin began to speak of Mary's health, as though she were really ailing. By the end of a week the fiction that Mary had been, or might be, ill was so far established that Lena was obliged to put a veto on a tentative proposal that Dr. MacFarlane's locum tenens should be asked to prescribe a tonic for the patient. Lena did her best to help Christie to keep up as much of her fiction as served to shield Mary from the strain of having her own real feelings recognised: but there were times when she felt just a little irritated by the necessity; ever so slightly annoyed with Miss Martin; almost impatient for the day when Mary should be gone.

2

On the night before Mary was to leave, Lena slept badly. They had taken their candles upstairs soon after nine, in order to sleep and wake early in time for the six o'clock start for the junction next morning. But for more than an hour Lena lay watching the finger of moonlight, that lit the edge of her curtain, lengthen till it touched the floor and set dim shadows of the room climbing up the mirror on the dressing-table opposite her bed. Midnight had sounded from the church before she fell asleep, to dream strangely.

She was on a long straight road that ran, white beneath dark, overhanging trees, along the ridge of a mountain. Precipices fell steeply on either side of the road beyond the tree-trunks, and above them, at the end of the avenue, the snow-capped peak of another mountain rose, blocking the way. The place had the dual quality, common to dreams, of being an unfamiliar vision of familiar scenes. It was at once Malquoits Park and the forest of Hohenfels, invested with yet a third association to which, as she hurried along,

she strove to give a name. In the distortion of dream emotion, her haste seemed to rise from the need to discern where she was : she was chasing the identity of her situation, running to discover the name that eluded her memory. As she ran she became aware of pursuit. Again, her dream consciousness was aware of what it was that raced behind her ; but, even as she desired to overtake the knowledge that kept ahead of her, so she feared and refused to admit her own recognition of what was so close at her heels. As she ran, the shadow of the trees brightened. The trees became transparent ; they let through the light—a clear white light without warmth, a light that cast no shadow. The trees turned to ice ; they were icicles that grew upwards, branching and interlacing over an icy road. The pursuit gained on her, grew audible : it was the steady trot-trot of a horse on the road behind her. She ran faster and faster : but the knowledge of what horse and what burden followed her grew in her mind, so that, though she would not turn to look at them, she knew that Mary Paradise and James Towyn were riding together on one horse, beside her now. She redoubled her efforts, but her feet froze and were heavy on the icy ground, and the horse drew ahead of her, so that she was obliged to see it. She tried to close her eyes, but her eyelids were stiff and frozen. As she looked at it, the flesh of the horse shrank from its bones. It moved, a white skeleton under the branching icicles. Its riders clung together with bony arms, and turned the eyeless sockets of their skulls as they rode, temple to temple, to gaze back at her in melancholy scorn. The knowledge that horse and rider were fleshless skeletons sharpened the ring of the hoofs on the frozen road. The dry tapping grew louder as the horse receded. It beat in Lena's ears. With a start she awoke, and lay trembling as she recognised the moon-flooded enclosure of her bedroom and yet heard the sharp trotting of a horse's hoofs, so that she was aware at once both of her dream and of the waking reality from which it had melted away.

The footsteps ceased. The dream had left her. In the silence of the night hour Lena recognised the origin of the cold that had frozen her vision. The bedclothes had slipped to the floor and the night air had chilled her, adding a cold shiver to the unforgotten anxieties of her waking life. Lena slipped out of bed to replace the coverings. When this was done, she went to drink water from the glass on her wash-hand-stand. As she did so, her eye caught a slight movement across the moonlit grass between the gravestones in the churchyard beyond the garden wall.

Lena went to the window and stood by the half-drawn curtain. The narrow strip of garden, and the churchyard beyond it, were now so brightly lit by the moonlight that she could almost read the inscriptions on the large railed tombs opposite her window. The figure she had seen had passed into the shadow of the great horse-chestnut tree and was no more than a movement in the darkness beneath its heavy branches. Lena waited, and, in the silence of the churchyard, heard the faint jingle of a bit in the mouth of a horse, somewhere on the grass out of her sight. In another moment the rider emerged from the shadow. The moonlight glittered on the shining leather of his riding-boots. His cloak was thrown back from his shoulders. Striding noiselessly over the turf, he came and stood breast high at the garden wall. Leaning with both arms crossed on the wall, his hat and riding-whip held in one hand, he gazed up at Mary's window. The moonlight silvered his fair head and took the colour from his mouth and eyes, giving his face a shadowed whiteness as of alabaster. When at last he called up to the window, it seemed a miracle that moved his lips and brought the low voice from them.

"Oh, my rose! My bird! I am here."

The reply was inaudible; but it came. Mary was at her window, whispering down to the upturned, moon-lit face. Lena drew back. She stood, out of the moonbeam that lay like a sword across her room, hidden in the shadow, alert and attentive, not to the now almost inaudible voice that

breathed its question and reply in the pauses of the swift, hushed dialogue outside, but to any stir within the house, any sign that Christie, too, had heard, and was awake and aware. She did not dare to listen at Christie's door, lest the click of her own bedroom latch, the creaking of the boards beneath her feet, should accomplish the disturbance of her sleep. Miss Martin had been tired that evening ; she was not a light sleeper. She would, certainly, if roused, come to Lena of her own accord. So long as she did not come, all was well.

The moonlight creeping across the floor touched Lena's feet before the soft colloquy ended. Miss Martin had not stirred. Lena, cold and trembling, heard the creak and click of bit and bridle as the horse was loosed from its tether. Presently the slow, cautious footsteps of a horse led carefully over a roadway drew her to the window again. A wind of dawn stirred in the chestnut leaves ; their rustling cloaked the sound of the departing steps, so that when, at the bottom of the hill, they ceased while the rider mounted and then broke into a trot, their beat was faint and dreamlike to Lena's ears, even as it had been when their approach had mingled with the dream that had heralded their coming.

When the last echoes had died away, Lena did not go to Mary, though she knew that the girl must be lying awake with whatever comfort or anguish the night had brought. She had shared too deeply in their stolen joy to break the solitude in which that joy was now recaptured and made permanent.

She lay wakeful till morning, reliving in slow-repeated memory the sweet and fruitless hours of her own young love. Each tone of the murmuring voices she had heard repeated the unforgotten cadences of that delight and passion. The old torment was renewed again. The vigil she kept was one with the wide-eyed rapture of little Mary Paradise, lying awake on the other side of the wall. She put out her hand and with stretched fingers touched the surface of the wallpaper. It lay unevenly over the older

paper on which it had been pasted, blurring the irregularity of the plaster that covered the brickwork, the outermost rind of the material barrier between her and the girl. But that barrier was not insurmountable, as was the intangible screen made by the girl's reserve and her own continued hesitation to make a resolute and persistent assault upon it ; to speak plainly ; to face admitted fact ; to put an end to an entanglement she could neither foster nor approve.

As the moon's disc yellowed in the blue of growing day outside her window, Lena became aware that her own conduct was presenting itself to her sharpened consciousness in a hitherto unrecognised aspect. In the sharp light that sleeplessness and fatigue can throw for a time on those secret places of the heart that are veiled by the shadows thrown by full daylight and its busy traffic, she saw motive and desire confound themselves. Her own frustrated longings showed as the explanation and excuse for her failure to impress upon Mary the standards of conduct she had accepted as her own and had inculcated to her charges until now. Judged by those standards, Mary's case was perilous indeed. She stood in danger of heartbreak, should her virtue resist or her guardians prevent the consummation of that passion it was no longer possible to ignore ; of ruin should she yield to it, evading the watch that was set on her now. And yet Lena had neither reasoned with her nor placed any deterring argument before her. That night, for the second time, she had withdrawn from an interview that by all the rules of worldly prudence and responsibility it was her duty to interrupt. The young lovers themselves could not have chosen a more exact and scrupulous sentinel for their stolen hour. What was it that was thus driving her to foster the flame it was her business to extinguish ? The answer she had not dared to hear till now could no longer be hushed. Lena, with every fibre of her own suffering and frustrated nature longed for the triumph of the passion she had surprised, whether its celebration were public and splendid or secret and threatened with scorn and discovery. The conventions

of her age and sex, the long habit of mind enforced by the practice of her profession, were torn and blown about in the gusts of her self-revelation like clouds before a gale. Nothing mattered to Lena but that Mary, whatever else she might have to face, should not miss the final assurance of her awakening, should not wander as Lena had done, frustrated and gnawed by unfulfilment ; unable to replace the image towards which all her longing set by any other so long as she lived ; debarred from all other offered love by the incomplete experience that had marred her youth. It was not Mary's secret she had surprised when she leaned over the gallery rail a fortnight ago, and stood in the shadow of her bedroom this very night—not Mary's secret, but her own. Lena lay astonished and aghast. What had she become that she now ranged herself with those who withdraw their aid from virtue in distress ? Was there a name for her too harsh for her thought to face ? It was no defence of her own weakness that Mary herself had gone too far in guile and secrecy to be overtaken and held back from the abyss towards which she was heading. Lena, feverish with wakefulness, recollected her dream, her own pursuit of that which in its turn pursued her. She saw again the dream-chasms that opened on either side of the slippery way ; the inaccessible ice-bound peak towards which they all rushed with such ungoverned haste. The exact parallel of her vision and her waking thought eluded her, but the conviction that it existed could not leave her driven mind. Tossing through the small hours she lay, lost in the confusions of fear and self-reproach.

A little before five she fell into uneasy sleep, from which she was awakened by Matilda, strange in curl-papers and a grey alpaca dressing-gown, bringing her an early cup of tea.

"To strengthen you for getting up, miss. It'll be six o'clock in ten minutes. Miss Martin said breakfast at half-past."

The little black omnibus drawn by two horses, one brown and the other piebald, drove out of Queen's Beaton at half-past seven on every weekday morning, and took two hours to traverse the ten miles that lay between Market Square and the railway junction. It had rumbled off down Queen Street on its way to the park and still Lena stood on the pavement outside the "George and Dragon," although the last flutter of Mary's handkerchief had been hidden by the turn of the road for several minutes. When the actual moment of parting had come, it was Christie who had shed a few quite inconsequent tears. She was not going to be away for more than ten days—two days for the journey and a week to recover from it was what she had allowed herself. Mary, who would not return till the spring, had gone dry-eyed and silent. There was a glow in her cheek, an excitement beneath the affectionate resignation of her parting with Lena that betrayed the secret of the night. But what promise had passed, what hope had been given, to set that signal of recovered joy in her face, was known to her alone.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. VEALE

I

Miss Martin returned to Queen's Beaton later than she had planned to do. The arrival and departure of visitors to High Vinnals was, she had found, determined, not only by the moon, but also by the incidence of market day, and the consequent limitation of the means of transport between the farm and the railway station.

"In winter they are cut off from the outer world for weeks at a time," she explained to Lena; "certainly they write and receive very few letters. They can only get to church in open weather at Christmas, and there are nearly always floods in the valley at Easter."

Mary, it appeared, had taken very kindly to life at the farm. With that instinct for the decorative possibilities of any employment that was native to her, she had undertaken to feed the chickens, and also the pigeons, twice a day. It was a pretty sight, Miss Martin said, to see her standing, with her skirt looped up above her ankles, throwing food from a basket poised on one hip, to the fowls that gathered round her feet, and the pigeons that flew down from the roof and dove-cote, as soon as her voice was heard calling them.

"She has learnt to wear pattens already," Miss Martin reported, "and she is going to sew at the patchwork quilt. Cousin Lydia's three daughters have been working on for the last three years. They talk of making bed-curtains to match, now Mary is there with so much time on her hands. It will keep her from writing too many letters."

Lena recognised the echo of the old feud, and wondered whether the new danger had added a reason to Miss Martin's indirect reference to it. But it was no use questioning her too openly. Christie would or would not tell what she had observed or suspected in her own way. Lena was not kept waiting long.

"All from Switzerland, in *and* out. Except one addressed to a Mrs. Veale in London. The mother of a school friend and a very kind lady, Mary says."

Lena wondered if Mary had volunteered the whole of this information, and also by what means Christie had continued to make sure of the provenance and direction of Mary's correspondence ; but all she said was :

"In London !"

"A little outside London, Mary says ; a semi-rural neighbourhood not far from Primrose Hill. The air there is very good."

"I do not remember anyone called Veale among the school friends of whom Mary spoke," she mused.

"There seems, I regret to say, to have been a second marriage in Mrs. Veale's life." Miss Martin pursed her lips as one to whom even a first marriage savoured of indiscretion, and Lena knew that Christie had pushed her enquiries into this matter much further than she would have herself been able to carry them. It comforted her to know that Mary was in communication with a woman who, being a mother, might know, even by letter, how to win more of the girl's confidence than she herself had done. She had even, as the day wore on, to combat the rising of a certain jealousy against the stranger to whom Mary seemed to be turning in her need. Was Mrs. Veale wise as well as kind, she wondered ? Would her advice be as good as her sympathy was welcome ? Was it enough to be a mother in order to become a heaven-sent counsellor to any girl in trouble ? Did not the very fact that a Mr. Veale had succeeded the father of Mary's anonymous friend point to something frivolous in the lady's nature, even as Christie had so clearly

felt? Lena sighed and put the thought away from her. Letters, after all, could not do much harm, and High Vinnals was too remote from London for there to be much intercourse between the little exile in Shropshire and a probably busy woman who might only write once in a great while to a girl who was no more to her than her daughter's school friend.

She read in the Court Circular that the Duke of Merioneth's party in Scotland included Mr. James Towyn, and noticed the name of the Hon. Lasceline Knowltyne among the guests of a famous hostess in the same county. Memories of Madeleine's chatter returned to her. She experienced a pang of quite another kind of jealousy at the idea that Mary, hidden away in the leafy seclusion of Shropshire, was even now being supplanted by a girl of the young man's own world, with whom his intercourse would suffer no interruption, and to whom he might ally himself with every accompaniment of congratulation and applause.

Before the spring brought Mary back to Queen's Beaton again, she might be forgotten as completely as Genevieve had been by the young but accomplished breaker of hearts, who had twice now, to Lena's own knowledge, played the traditional part of the gallant who loves and rides away. Lena could only hope that Mary's grief would prove as easily cured as Genevieve's had been ; but her own reason told her that Mary had more cause for remembrance, and was herself of the stuff that is less easily forgotten than that which went to the making of the little lady who wrote such ecstatic and italicised letters home from Malta, where her husband was now stationed.

Meanwhile there were Mary's letters, written once a week to each lady alternately and posted sometimes in Ludlow, sometimes in Shrewsbury, so that their arrival could never be counted on for any one day in the week.

Mary wrote fully and rather charmingly of life at the farm. She made little water-colour sketches of the garden ; of the dairy ; of Bob and Nan, the Welsh sheep-dogs ; of

her own large, low-raftered bedroom, to illustrate her accounts of the small events that made up the daily round of life at High Vinnals. One market day she had driven into Shrewsbury with Farmer Pristy in his dog-cart. A parcel of Palin's Shrewsbury cakes, all fallen into crumbs around big, black currant hearts, arrived with the letter chronicling this expedition. Twice she had been to Ludlow, and dined at the ordinary in the panelled audit-room at the "Feathers." It was after the second of these occasions that Miss Martin received a letter from her aunt.

"I expect Cousin Lydia feels we should like her to give us news of dear Mary," she said, turning the still sealed and folded letter in her hand. "She is not a great letter-writer."

This was quite true. Letter-writing was so rare an occurrence in Mrs. Pristy's well-filled life that she experienced no small difficulty in escaping from the trammels cast on her mind by *The Complete Letter-Writer*, a book to which she had been in the habit of referring whenever duty or the promptings of friendship found her pen in hand. Moreover, either from motives of economy or because she had never need to fill more than one side of a sheet in order to set down all she and *The Complete Letter-Writer* together had to express, she used no envelope, but folded her sheet of letter-paper as her mother and her grandmother had done before her, and stuck it down with wafers before adding a brown penny stamp to the unsealed blank side on which, with great deliberation, she inscribed the address.

On this occasion, however, the news she had to chronicle, and the difficulty she found in expressing her own anxiety in the matter of breaking through the hedges set about *The Complete Letter-Writer*, had driven her to that resort, so emphatically condemned by the manual, of crossing her script. The resultant intersection of lines in her thin spidery writing offered an apparently indecipherable tangle. Miss Martin, in opening the letter, had made matters worse by tearing a little hole in the midst of it, where one of the wafers

had stuck too fast to be lifted by the edge of her paper-knife. Moreover, Miss Martin's sight was troubling her, and she had put off the day when she must get new spectacles rather too long. So it was quite five minutes after she had opened and spread Mrs. Pristy's letter out on the table that she looked over her spectacles at Lena and said :

" I rather fancy that Cousin Lydia is feeling uneasy about Mary. " She seems to have taken cold. Will you look at the letter, Lena ? I find her writing difficult."

Lena took the letter.

" MY DEAR COUSIN CHRISTINA, " it ran,—" I take up my pen to address a few lines to you in the hope that they will find you in the enjoyment of as full a measure of health and strength as it has pleased Divine Providence to allow to me, and mine. Your Mary caught cold going to Ludlow without her cape and Mr. Pristy having to drive round by Knighton. It is some little time since I last had the privilege of receiving a letter from you, but distance alone never could impair the strength of that friendship which has endured the test of so many years of separation. We were all pleased to know you had done the journey so comfortable. Your Mary has been in bed since Sunday with her cough. News of you and your dear ones will always be most welcome, but I will not press you to write, knowing how ready you ever are to discharge all the offices of a correspondence that must keep you fully occupied, and Mary cannot write as I do not allow the ink-bottle to go upstairs because of the sheets.

" My husband and children join me in expressing every good wish and affectionate remembrance to you and all at Queen's Beaton, and I do not like the look of this Mrs. Veale. She came here Saturday in a hired carriage from the ' Feathers,' which is why Mary's cold has worsened, so far as I see it.

"With kindest regards from myself to you, dearest, and best of friends, I remain,

"Yours affectionately,

"COUSIN LYDIA DORGAS PRISTY.

"PS.—Mrs. Veale's hair is far from being its proper colour."

Lena put the letter down.

"I'm glad Mrs. Pristy is keeping Mary in bed," she remarked. "She should be very careful about colds after her illness last year."

"It seems strange that Mary did not tell us about Mrs. Veale in her last letter," said Miss Martin.

"Yes," said Lena, "but she may not have expected to see her. Mrs. Veale may have been taking the waters at Llandrindod or staying at Church Stretton. Many people go there in the summer from London, I believe, and she should be on her way home by now. It is the end of September."

"She is evidently a rich woman, to be able to travel by road. I wonder why my cousin dislikes her."

"The rich are not necessarily lovable," said Lena, "but Mrs. Pristy gives us no clue excepting that Mrs. Veale seems to have dyed her hair."

"Cousin Lydia has worn a *cap* ever since the day of her wedding," declared Miss Martin, with asperity, "as every decent-minded woman is bound to do."

Lena did not combat this pronouncement.

"If Mrs. Veale is a fashionable lady, we can perhaps explain Mrs. Pristy's possible annoyance and embarrassment at receiving an unexpected visit from her, particularly when Mary was not up and about to introduce and entertain her."

"According to this letter," Miss Martin pointed out, "Mary does not seem to have gone to bed until after Mrs. Veale's departure. It is all very complicated—very complicated *and* surprising."

They debated a little as to whether any steps should be taken to ascertain more particulars of the situation and to arrive if possible at the true cause of Mrs. Pristy's worry, if worry were indeed at the root of her letter. A second reading of it, however, inclined them to suppose that the good and simple-hearted creature had thought it best to let them know why Mary had missed a post, and that her impressions of Mrs. Veale, if given in conversation, instead of by the hampering vehicle of a letter, would prove to be less sinister than they seemed in the unprefaced fragments of her missive.

It was decided that a letter to Mary from Lena and one to Mrs. Pristy from Miss Martin would meet the case for the moment. Lena was to be explicit in asking for information about Mrs. Veale, while Miss Martin, to avoid confusing her excellent relative, would confine herself to thanking Mrs. Pristy for the care she was taking of their young friend.

Lena's letter was enclosed in a parcel containing a small writing-case and some ready-sharpened pencils, in order that the patient, if still confined to bed, might continue the correspondence which had always been the daily occupation of her leisure without any risk to Mrs. Pristy's spotless sheets.

The post between High Vinnals and Queen's Beaton followed a circuitous route, and it was a week before any reply to either letter could be expected.

Mrs. Pristy's arrived first. She had exchanged **EXAMPLE XIV : *Letter to a distant Friend***, for **EXAMPLE XXXII : *Short Note Reporting Progress from the Sick-Room***.

"You will, I know"—so the polished phrases opened—"rejoice with me in learning the glad news that our prayers have been heard and that our dear invalid is to be spared to us for many happy years to come. Your Mary came down to the parlour this afternoon, but has gone up again, though there was a good fire lighted."

There was some confusion in the next paragraph, the alternative genders, and the choice of phrases applicable

to the state of the weather offered by *The Complete Letter-Writer* having been evidently rather much for Mrs. Pristy's powers of adaptation.

"The present state of the weather proving propitious," the letter went on, "it is hoped that, should it improve, he or she, will be able to indulge in carriage exercise soon or within the ensuing week or ten days. All will depend on the advice of our good physician. Not that we had the doctor over to her, it being no more than a common cold. She thinks to be well enough to go blackberrying with the girls on Saturday if this rain gives over. Our dear invalid joins with me in most cordial greetings to you and yours and in thanks to Divine Providence for the intervention that has blessed our care for him or her. Mary desires her love to you and her auntie and will write a letter herself.

"Hoping this letter will find you in the best of health and in such a measure of good spirits as the sad circumstances permit, with assurances that all cause for anxiety is now at an end, I am, my dear friend,

"Your affectionate cousin,

"L. D. PRISTY."

Mary's letter arrived next day. It was written in ink and on the notepaper she had taken with her to High Vinnals. From its contents, Lena judged that her own letter enclosed in the small parcel had been delayed in the post and had not reached Mary until after the letter announced by Mrs. Pristy had been written and despatched.

Mary told of a chill caught while driving through the rain in the farmer's dog-cart, and described with some humour the gruels and possets with which Mrs. Pristy had combated it.

"I cannot tell you how kind Mrs. Pristy and the girls have been to me," she wrote. "I have been indeed

ashamed to cause them all so much trouble, and can only be thankful that harvest was over before I added to the tasks of the farm by my foolish imprudence. If I had listened to advice and taken my cape, although the weather seemed so bright and fine when we started, this would never have occurred. I shall be wiser and more obedient in future."

But of Mrs. Veale and her visit there was no word. Lena concluded that Mrs. Pristy must have kept it a secret from the girl. The following week, when Mary wrote again without mentioning either the name of Mrs. Veale or the little writing-case and pencils, Lena decided that her parcel with the letter must have been lost in the cross-country post, as not infrequently happened in those days.

2

October had come, cracking the spiked husks around the chestnuts in the avenue, touching the heavy green of the leaves on the churchyard-tree to a bright yellow, that turned its branches black to the eye, and sent a sunlit reflection across the wall into the bedrooms of Little Chantry House, even on the greyest days. The rich chortle of pheasants as they rocketed over the furrows or out of the coverts round Queen's Beaton put Lena in mind of the glug-glug of port when it flows into the glass after the dusty bottle has been uncorked, and autumn has established itself once more round comfortable tables for the after-dinner hour of country hospitality.

Madeleine was back at the Rectory, spending secluded mornings in the garden, and occasionally taking Mr. Malory's arm for a walk up to Castle Gate to sit for an hour after twilight with Lena and Miss Martin. Georgina was said to be happy at school in London. Nurse had agreed to stay on in order to take the new baby from the month so

soon as the new resident nursery governess Madeleine had heard of could be installed. There was no room for Mary any longer at the Rectory. The place she had occupied had closed up. The Rector, it is true, never failed to enquire for her whenever he met either of the ladies ; but Madeleine never mentioned her name. Lena derived a certain satisfaction from observing that the name of Mr. Towyn had also vanished from the records of Madeleine's daily joys and annoyances. Even when the hollow sound of distant shooting came across the park in the early afternoon, and witnessed to the parties once more assembled at the Castle, there was no news of any young man calling at the Rectory, or of any raids on Ettie's nursery tea. The wooden doors in Castle Gate remained closed. Even if Lady Gervaise had returned from the Continent, she made no sortie towards Beaton Clarence. Malquoits was itself again.

Nor was Madeleine the only person who avoided any reference to the absent Mary. Mrs. Bartram drove over to discuss her winter's reading and needlework with the ladies and omitted to enquire for little Miss Paradise. Mrs. MacFarlane began the preliminary discussions of the Church school concert and the parish christmas-tree entertainment without expressing any wish that Mary might return in time to assist her. Only Tom Grimthorpe, meeting Lena late one afternoon as she crossed a field on her way home from her walk, paused gun in hand to hope Miss Paradise had not left Queen's Beaton for good.

Even in her talk with Christie the name of Mary occurred at gradually increasing intervals. Sometimes a week would go by and neither of them would speak of her until a letter from High Vinnals arrived to give them cause. Nor did her letters provide them with much to talk on. Indeed, so uniform did Mary's account of the weather and the health of all at High Vinnals grow, so identical the perorations embracing her hopes for the health and happiness of those at Queen's Beaton, that she might, as Lena observed after reading one of them, just as well follow Mrs. Pristy's

example and copy out the same model epistle from *The Complete Letter-Writer* every week. The ladies themselves experienced a reciprocal difficulty in replying to these communications. Mary had not been with them long enough to make it a matter of course that she should be interested in the small news they had to tell. A chronicle of Matilda's culinary triumphs ; a game-book of the mice and the house sparrows that fell to the cat's paws ; a list of the people who had sent pheasants and partridges to the Chantry House, was all they could easily communicate. Now and again Miss Martin would write of Ettie when she had met the Rectory perambulator in the town. But Lena never mentioned the Rectory or its occupants in her letters to Mary. As time went on, her resentment against the treatment the girl had met with there deepened and formed a very real barrier in her heart to the affection she had once felt for Madeleine.

But on All Souls' Day something happened that gave Lena news enough, but left her no time to write it. Colonel Seymour, riding over to lunch with his daughter, had been thrown by his horse in Market Square, and so seriously injured that he had been carried up to the Rectory unconscious. For several days he had lain there suffering from 'double concussion, and Lena had been called upon to go down to the Rectory to take charge of the household for Madeleine, whose grief and distress incapacitated her and gave rise to serious fears for her own health. Colonel Seymour died on the third of November, and the following night Madeleine was delivered of a still-born child.

These melancholy events, following one another in quick succession, put back the clock for Miss Quibell, placing her, as they did, for a few days in control of affairs at the Abbey as well as at Queen's Beaton. The riding-habit she had not worn for three years was unpacked, and twice a day for a week she made the double journey to Abbot's Beaton and back to the Rectory, dealing with lawyers and trustees and

trained nurses, arranging for the funeral, telegraphing to Genevieve, and by the end of the week quelling Lady Dale's determination to sit and weep, in heavy veils of crape, by Madeleine's bedside.

When at last she returned to the Chantry House, Lena was so worn out with anxiety and her own real grief for the death of Colonel Seymour and the loss of Madeleine's child that Miss Martin forbore to communicate the rather disturbing news that had come from High Vinnals.

Mary had written to both the ladies at once, announcing that she had been suffering from another cold, rather worse than the last one, and that Dr. Jones from Ludlow thought she had better not spend the winter at the farm.

"So, dear Aunt Lena and Aunt Christie," the letter went on, "I think of accepting an offer made to me by Mrs. Veale of London, who wants a young companion. She has been to see me here. She wants someone who can play the piano and speak French. I should live with her in London, and perhaps go to Paris as well. It would be very delightful."

Miss Martin had answered the letter on her own behalf, telling Mary of Lena's absence and its causes and adding her own unsupported opinion that, good as the opportunity of visiting London and Paris might seem, it was one that needed some thought before it was definitely accepted.

Having posted this letter, she had momentarily forgotten Mary and Mrs. Veale in the immediate anxieties and duties caused by Lena's absence. On the evening of Lena's return she purposely said nothing about it, contenting herself with listening to all her friend was not too tired to relate, and in seeing that she went to bed early with a fire in her room for comfort.

The next morning brought a letter from Mrs. Pristy. The news she had to communicate was of a nature so

unusual that her manual had offered her no formula for its conveyance.

"DEAR COUSIN," wrote the poor woman, "I am sorry to say that your Mary Paradise has gone without her box. She drove into Ludlow with Mr. Pristy yesterday and gave him the slip while he was in the Cattle Market. The boots gave him a message that she was gone back to High Vinnals with Tom Pritchard. This not being so. It seems she told our Dorcas she was off to that Mrs. Veale. Mrs. Veale has been here twice, leaving no address. Am I to keep her box or send it by railroad, and, if so, where?"

"Hoping this finds you in the best of health and spirits,

"Your affectionate cousin,

"LYDIA PRISTY."

For at least half an hour after the arrival of this letter Lena was kept so busy assuaging Miss Martin's remorse for having misjudged the immediacy of Mary's warning that they both lost sight of the main issue. When they did recover from the shock and begin to concern themselves with the problem, they were faced with complete bewilderment. Freed from the entanglement of polite letter-writing, Mrs. Pristy had achieved pith and clarity. It was no use appealing to her for further details. She had, clearly, told them all she knew. Nor was it at all likely that Miss Martin's proposal of a pilgrimage to London with the object of undertaking a house-to-house visit in the outskirts of Primrose Hill in search of Mrs. Veale would carry them much further. Mary herself had spoken of a visit to Paris. It was probable that even by now she was on her way there. In any case, nothing could be gained by a precipitous and uninformed journey to the metropolis. Late in the afternoon it was decided, with much reluctance on Lena's side, to take Mr. Malory into their confidence.

"Some advice we must have," said poor Miss Martin, "but Madeleine must not be allowed to know of the circumstance. It would be *most* injurious to her in her present state of health."

"I am sure Mr. Malory will agree," said Lena.

The Rector was very kind and wise. There was nothing, he thought, to be done for the moment. Was it not more than likely that Mary herself would offer her own explanation in the course of a day or so?

"A letter may be in the post even as we talk of it," he cheered them, "and in any case, the less said or done for the moment the better. Later on, if you have real cause for anxiety, I might go to London myself. Madeleine will not be able to go for her usual Christmas shopping visit to her aunt this year."

Two days later the truth of his supposition was vindicated. A letter with the London postmark arrived by the mid-day post. It was written in great haste on pink, scented notepaper, embossed with a gold monogram in which the initials "B.V." were intertwined. It bore a date but no address.

"MY DEAR AUNTS," wrote Mary,— "As I told you, I have accepted Mrs. Veale's offer of a situation and here I am in London. An opportunity of an escort presented itself quite suddenly, so I came away at once.

"Mrs. Veale is very kind. She wishes me to call her Bella, which I find rather difficult, but hope to get used to it, as this will please her.

"We are off to Paris in a day or two, where I am to be given some new clothes, as I left all but a handbag behind me at High Vinnals. They would not be suitable for the life I am to lead.

"I will write to you again from Paris, and also to Mrs. Pristy, who did not know I was leaving her so soon. I hope you have not been anxious about me. I am quite well and very happy.

"With my warmest love, dear Aunt Lena and Aunt Christie.

"Ever your devoted and affectionate

"MARY."

The writing was hurried, and the meaning less carefully expressed than was usual in Mary's letters. Lena had an uneasy sense that Mary had not been entirely free to write what she wished. Had Mrs. Veale, she wondered, succeeded where Christie had so definitely failed ; or was there some other censorship of Mary's letters now ? The reference to the use of Mrs. Veale's Christian name made it seem unlikely that Mary had written for that lady's eye, and yet there was a constraint and an evasiveness that, coupled with the absence of any address at which letters might reach her, afforded clear evidence that a great deal was being withheld.

She took the earliest opportunity of letting Mr. Malory know that his surmise had been correct, and agreed with his expressed opinion that it would be wise to allow it to be known in Queen's Beaton that Mary had gone abroad with friends.

"It would be a pity," said Mr. Malory, "that anyone supposing her to be in Shropshire should meet her in Town ; we should avoid, so far as possible, any occasions for further gossip."

Lena gathered that there had been a certain amount of scandal already, though none of it had reached their ears. She knew she could trust Mr. Malory to suppress it where possible, and was grateful to him for turning this fresh evidence of the basis for unkind speculation into a means for allaying it. Presently she hoped to be able to volunteer real news of Mary. The silence they had allowed to gather around her absence was, she now realised, not a cloak for indifference, but the screen put up between the Little Chantry House and the rest of Queen's Beaton with the half kindly, half malicious intention of hiding from the

persons it would surely hurt the pleasurable gossip it was impossible for human nature to deny itself.

Ten days later, Mary wrote from Paris a brief and hurried letter. She had been to the play and to the opera ; had driven in the Bois ; had twice caught sight of the Empress newly back from Biarritz, and lovelier than even rumour painted her.

"The crinoline," said Mary, "is out of fashion. The Empress does not wear it at Compiègne or in the evening. And hair is worn dressed, too, with a curl on the shoulder. I am to try mine that way to-morrow."

The letter ended hastily with a few scrawled lines of salutation and farewell, as though its writer had been interrupted unexpectedly. Like the former epistle, it was dated but gave no address. On a second reading, Lena realised that it made no mention of Mrs. Veale.

Mary's next letter was addressed to Miss Martin, and was a long one almost macaronic in its admixture of French words and phrases with the English text. Two pages of it described a *couvre-pieds* she was working on cream-coloured silk canvas with coloured floss silks, representing a basket of roses of various colours, with the basket done in blue china beads and here and there a glass bead sewn into a rose to represent dew.

"I do hope, dear Aunt Christie, that I may be able to finish it and have it mounted with a padded and quilted satin lining in time for Christmas. It is to be my present for Aunt Lena. I am working one for you, but its nature must remain a secret. But there is so much to be done that I seldom have a quiet hour with my needle. I have been to the dressmaker's this afternoon to be fitted for an evening gown in blue and yellow *cristalline*, and a walking costume with a *porte-jupe Pompadour*, so that I can go out in rainy weather. I am to have an *Albanesienne* to wear under it and a little fur turban.

"Yesterday I felt a little sad. The weather was bright

enough, but we had been to the Italian opera the night before to hear *La Traviata*. The music was beautiful and the décor and the dresses were lovely, and Mario sang Alfredo—the lover's part—and Piccolimini was Violetta. She is very young and beautiful, and wore the most expensive jewels. The Emperor and Empress were there. We saw them beautifully from our box. The Empress was all in pale blue with a wreath of forget-me-nots in turquoise and diamonds. But the story of the opera is very sad and in the end Violetta dies in a decline. There is a famous novel about it, *La Dame aux Camélias*, but this I am not allowed to read."

Miss Martin drew in her chin and looked over her spectacles.

"I am inclined to think rather more *highly* of Mrs. Veale than I did," she said. "She seems to have some sense, though her taste in dress appears to be loud."

"Does Mary speak of her clothes, of Mrs. Veale's toilette?"

Miss Martin turned over the pages of the letter.

"No, Lena. There is no mention of what Mrs. Veale wore on these occasions, but we can hardly *suppose* that blue and yellow *crystalline* dresses are Mary's own purchase."

"No," said Lena. "She must look very pretty in such a dress."

"Very," agreed Miss Martin, and returned to the letter. Presently she looked up again. "A pity," she remarked reflectively, "that dear Madeleine is not well enough to travel just now. She is always so much interested in the latest fashions."

But Lena had no pity to waste on Madeleine. Her mind was fully occupied with quite a different anxiety. Mary certainly could not afford to pay for any of the pretty things she wrote about. There must be—Lena was alive to this—an endless detail of shoes and gloves, of handkerchiefs and

fal-lals, accompanying the gowns Mary described. Her little hair trunk had been sent back to Queen's Beaton : the ladies having decided that for the sake of Cousin Lydia's sense of propriety, if for no other reason, it should be assumed that they were in full possession of Mary's intentions, and that she was definitely returning to the Little Chantry House before long. Mary must have required an entire new outfit. Mrs. Veale was apparently rich ; she was certainly lavish ; would she not eventually, and sooner perhaps than Mary dreamed, prove to be capricious also ? Might not Mary, her head turned by so much indulgence and amusement, grow careless, or fail altogether in the performance of those slight, those evidently very slight, duties she had undertaken to discharge as the lady's companion ? Lena paused and let her sewing fall into her lap. What were Mary's duties ? Her letters spoke of pleasures only. And where, in Paris, was she staying, and for how long ? They were still without the means of communicating with her.

" Does Mary say anything about returning to England ? Does she give us any address to write to ? " she asked.

" No," said Miss Martin. She says :

" Do not write to me in Paris, as we may be going to the Italian lakes as soon as this lovely bright weather comes to an end. I will send you a *poste restante* address as soon as I know where we shall be stopping for long enough to enable letters to reach us. I am quite anxious to hear news of you, and if Matilda's winter cold has begun, and whether Tibby has caught any sleepy wasps as you said I should see her do this autumn, and, when the new baby comes to the Rectory, if it is a boy or a girl."

" She sounds a little homesick," said Lena.

" Only a *very* little," said Miss Martin.

3

It was eleven o'clock on the morning of the first Monday in December. The weather was still mild and bright, and the thin winter sunshine poured in through the greenhouse glass and chequered the floor of the library so pleasantly that Miss Martin almost let the stove go out, she was so warm in her grey linsey-woolsey skirt and sacque. No subscriber or customer was in the library. The friends had been working for half an hour in silence when, without any warning so far as the two ladies were concerned, the church bell tolled one.

"Dear me," said Miss Martin, "who can that be for?"

"I have heard of nobody," said Lena, looking up from the account-book. "Perhaps some poor child has died of a congestion."

But the minutes went by and that lamenting note repeated itself, thirty, forty, fifty-five——

Lena laid down her pen.

"I can't keep my mind on the figures," she said. "It must be a person of some consequence or the Rector would not have sanctioned it before the funeral, for Madeleine's sake."

At that moment Matilda appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, Miss Martin! Oh, Miss Quibell!" she gasped. "I couldn't bear it any longer, so I just popped down the street to ask the crier, and it's the old Duke. Him as is uncle at the Castle. The Rector's having it done out of respect to young Mister James."

4

The fire in the coffee-room of the "Bull and Crown" had been banked up with slack, and gave off twisted clouds of grey-green smoke that curled thickly into the wide chimney. Crumbs of yellow ash choked the bars of the bow-fronted

iron grate. The room was cold, and smelt of boiled mutton.

Lena sat at a table near a window darkened by a black wire screen bearing the legend MOON 月夜. She had failed to eat a slice of beige-coloured meat with a fringe of hard white fat tinged with the crimson vinegar that bled from a segment of dark beetroot on the plate beside it. A darkly pitted potato slipped away from the fork she tried to plunge into the soaplike texture. A slice of grey bread with a flaccid crust lay on one side of her plate ; on the other a cup of grey coffee stood, lukewarm and undrinkable.

She had left Queen's Beaton with the half-past seven omnibus and it was now nearly two o'clock. In little more than half an hour she would have to set off on her return journey. The January light was already yellowing to afternoon : soon it would be dusk. Once more she drew Mary's letter out of her pocket.

" We are staying in Bath. Bella is to drink the waters for a fortnight. . . . It is so long since I had news of you. . . . I have a request. I did not think I should need any of my allowance, but now I must ask for it. I have made enquiries. There is an inn—the "Bull and Crown"—half a mile on the high road from the railway junction. I could drive there on Monday next if you could wait for me from twelve noon. It is not sure at what time I may have the horses. I will call at the post-office for your answer. . . . Do not send a telegram. . . . "

It was the only letter they had had for two months. Mary had not gone to Italy ; at least, no news of an Italian journey had reached them. The cream silk canvas *couvre-pieds* and a book-cover embroidered with Miss Martin's monogram and a group of pansies had arrived from London on Christmas Eve, with a pair of red mittens for Matilda, all ticketed with good wishes in Mary's handwriting. Miss Martin's pleasure in the gift had been almost destroyed by her own chagrin at being debarred from sending Mary the

bed-socks she had knitted. She had spoken of this once or twice during the day, murmuring :

" I do hope dear Mary does not suffer from *cold feet*," or " This new fleecy wool is so *truly* comforting."

They had ceased to refer to Mary's obstinate withholding of any means by which they might communicate with her. They did not openly discuss her situation any longer. On the way back from morning prayers, Christie had said :

" A very sad Christmas, with poor Madeleine still too ill to appear in church and *no* one in the Malquoits pew."

Lena, drawing nearer to the unspoken thought in both their hearts, had answered :

" There will be no one in the Malquoits pew on Christmas Day again. The new Duke has other claims on his attendance now."

It was twenty-five minutes to three. Lena drew from her pocket the small packet into which she had folded and tied the banknotes and called for a pen, paper, and ink. She would address it to Mary and leave it at the Inn to be called for.

" Dear Mary," she wrote, " I can wait no longer. Here is thirty pounds in notes. Will you not let me know where I may send the next quarter in March ? We are both well and send you our love. Your room is ready for you any day when you can come back to it.

" Your affectionate Aunt,

" KATHLEEN QUIBELL."

But when she had sealed the envelope with the notes inside it, she paused. In what name must she write the superscription ? Was Mary still " Miss Paradise " ? The doubt had never touched her thought until that moment. Now it came in a flash, as though spoken from outside.

As she gazed at the blank paper in front of her there was

a clatter on the roadway outside the window, and a carriage and pair dashed up to the front of the hotel.

Mary had come at last.

For a moment she thought she must be mistaken.

The woman who rustled into the coffee-room wearing a muff and cape of sealskin bordered with grebe and a hat drooping with feathers seemed taller than Mary, and her hair lay in two long curls over one shoulder. The colour in her cheeks was high ; there was a dark brilliance in her eyes, a vivid scarlet on her mouth, that made her beauty startling and unreal. As she unfastened the clasps of her fur cape a wave of scent passed warm from her, reaching Lena before the painted lips could kiss her cheek.

It was not until the low, excited voice, breathing, " Oh, Aunt Lena !—dearest—I am so sorry," reassured her that Lena could believe the change.

" I had to wait till Bella was safely back from the Queen's Baths before I could give her the slip. She rests all the afternoon three times a week. That is why I can come to-day. How are you, dearest, dearest Aunt Lena ? How glad I am to see you again ! "

It was Mary's voice, but the chatter was strange, almost insincere. They sat down in two horsehair arm-chairs by the fire, that now showed a flickering flame or two through the sulphurous smoke that still twisted up from the banked coal in the grate, and pulled their skirts up over their petticoats as they put their feet out towards the dusty fender. Lena saw that Mary's petticoat was of some soft brown stuff patterned with roses, and caught the glimmer of silk stockings above her fur-topped boots.

As they talked—hurriedly, because the time was short ; foolishly, because there was no time to be serious—Lena was aware of two currents of feeling, two kinds of apprehension, at work in her mind. The details of Mary's luxurious dress ; the coral and gold of the bracelets that

matched her brooch and ear-rings ; the brown and coral-coloured stripes of her poplin flounces ; occupied her eyes as she answered the eager, affectionate questions with which Mary plied her. Mary spoke breathlessly, as if she could not hear too much of the house she had left, as if she dared not wait for the questions Lena herself must surely ask.

Were there any new subscribers to the library ? Had Aunt Christie seen the French chenille work ? Was the butcher's boy still courting Matilda ? How many mice had the cat brought into the hall ? Had she yet caught a bird ? Did Aunt Lena know if Georgie were happy at school ? if Ettie had begun to use *Reading Without Tears* ?

But under the quick chatter of question and reply Lena heard her own heart crying in dread to Mary's heart that could give no reassuring answer

The news of Colonel Seymour's death, of the loss of Madeleine's child, was known to her. Oh, she had seen it all in *The Times*. Aunt Lena must not think that she was buried in London. All news came to London. It was in the country that one heard nothing. Aunt Lena was a darling country mouse. Mary would not have her different for all the world.

"It has not taken long to change you into a town mouse," said Lena. "I suppose the process is very rapid in Paris."

"Paris is lovely, so gay, so elegant. You have never danced the valse, Aunt Lena ? It is like floating to music. I am to have riding lessons when we get back to Town."

Lena could bear it no longer. The minutes were slipping by in such talk as two foolish schoolgirls might have in the confusion of a chance encounter.

"Are you happy, Mary ?"

There was a pause. Mary turned her head away from the fire. The light from the window was still strong enough to catch her face at an angle that showed the flattened surface of rouge on her cheek. It gave her a harsh and anxious

look, cast a hint of coming age and weariness over the rounded contours.

"Oh, yes," she said at last, "very happy, sometimes."

"Then why can you not let us know where you are? Why does Mrs. Veale not allow us to communicate with you?"

It was done at last; Mary was brought to a standstill.

"It is not Bella," said Mary.

"I know," said Lena. "What are you doing, Mary? Where are you going?"

For answer, the girl slipped from her chair and sat on the floor by Lena's side, putting her arms round her waist. Her hat fell back, freeing the waved and scented masses of her hair.

"You must not ask me yet," she breathed, "not now, Aunt Lena. Soon I may tell you. It is what you think, but not all. I have to wait, to be patient. You know—you have guessed why?"

"I have feared; I still fear for you, Mary."

"I fear myself, when I am cowardly, when I am alone."

"You are alone, then?"

"With Bella, for the moment; but soon all will be well again."

"All has been well, Mary?"

The slight body pressed against her knee trembled with a sigh. Mary withdrew one hand from Lena's waist and raised it to a fine gold chain that held some hidden pendant round her neck.

"See," she said, drawing it upward from her bosom, "I may not wear it any way but this."

The ring lay thin and warm on Lena's palm.

"You are married, Mary!"

"Oh! Aunt Lena—soon, soon now. Our vows are sacred; they were blessed as though it had been in a church. We made them to one another with Bella's consent."

"Mrs. Veale knows of this?"

"It was she who advised it, until all opposition could be overcome."

"And then you went to Paris!"

"Yes."

"But you could not go to Italy."

Mary raised her head from her aunt's shoulder and the ring, slipping from her palm, dangled on its chain against Lena's side, knocking softly as if for the admission of fear.

"It was in Paris that the news came. The old Duke's death. Oh, Aunt Lena, you will understand how it was then. He had to go back. There was so much business, so many difficulties. I am with Bella now, waiting until—until . . . Aunt Lena, it *will* be all right if I have patience -- and am brave. . . ."

She broke off, biting her lip, blinking away her tears. Lena held her more closely.

"Mary," she said, "you must come back home. It is in your own home, with your own people, that you should be now, waiting till the time comes when there need be no more secrecy."

Mary drew herself away from the sheltering arm:

"Oh, no—no, I cannot. That is what I cannot do. With you—there, so close to Malquoits, I should be found. It would be too dangerous. You do not understand, Aunt Lena. You and Aunt Christie are known. I cannot live with you and be visited by him. It is different with Bella. He can always come to me while I am with Bella—even now for an hour or two, sometimes. I am in London when he is there."

"But you are staying in Bath now, Mary."

"Only while he is away. I have to go where Bella goes when I am not with him. She gives me a home—soon I shall have my own home. Soon now."

Lena remembered the notes in her pocket.

"Mary," she said, "you went to Mrs. Veale as her companion? Have you no salary? No money . . .?"

"I have everything I need. But—oh—when I am with him I need nothing."

"If you are kept without money," said Lena, her anger rising at last to meet the confirmation of her fears, "it is because someone does not want you to be free. You had to plot even to meet me here. What is it, Mary? You are hiding something from me. You are afraid."

Mary rose to her feet and began to walk to and fro in the darkening room.

"Yes," she said at last, "but it is only sometimes. There is someone—he is quite old—a friend of Bella's, who has spoken to me—oh, I cannot tell you how—never quite openly, if he sees I am at all sad, or if he finds me alone. I am afraid of him, though he says nothing that is not kind. But one day—when I said to Bella that I needed money for some new gloves, she laughed and said I could always get it from him—from this friend of hers—if I chose——"

Lena rose and stood beside the trembling girl.

"You cannot remain where you are," she cried, and took Mary's hands into her own strong clasp. "I implore you to come home with me, to leave this woman who can expose you thus to insult. You cannot ever speak to this horrible old man again."

"Oh, I must. I must. While I am in Bella's house I must be agreeable to him—dance with him. Bella requires it. She knows I have no money and cannot leave her. She knows I must stay with her, because she can hide me as you could not do until I am taken away once more—and for good. I am safer with her than with you. Bella has known other girls, situated as I am, with enemies, who did not place themselves under the right protection—such as hers. One of them was strangled. They found her body in Highgate Woods not many weeks ago."

"It was Mrs. Veale who told you this, wishing to frighten you, Mary."

"Oh, but it was true."

"Such a thing could not happen at Queen's Beaton to a girl in her own home, safe with her own people."

"I am safe with Bella. I have promised to be patient, to wait under her care. I cannot, I cannot go back to Queen's Beaton."

The heavy fur cape had fallen from Mary's shoulders as she walked about the room, and lay, held by her bent elbow, half dragging on the floor, across the hoops of her crinoline. Pulling her hands away from Lena's, she began to gather it together, settling it on her shoulders again. The scent of the perfume she wore mingled with the smell of the sealskin in the warmth of her silk-clad body. She stood flushed and troubled, facing Lena with a desperate obstinacy that even now concealed some part of her true mind. As her fingers, where rings gleamed above the gold and coral bracelets round her wrist, felt for the clasps of her cape, Lena realised what it was that stood between them, stronger, because it could not be spoken of, than the passion Mary had acknowledged. If it were only the last despairing hope of a happy issue to the situation in which she now found herself that kept Mary lingering in the dubious protection under which her possibly faithless lover had left her, Lena might have prevailed. But in every fold of her raiment, in each flounce and jewel that she wore, in the scent of the rouge on her cheeks, the pomatum that glossed her long curls, Mary proclaimed her enslavement to a luxury, longed for always, now obtained and become necessary to her. The vague terrors, and half-imagined dangers of which she had spoken, were still more endurable than the thought of a return to the plainness and monotony she had forsaken for this gaudy excitement.

Lena's heart failed her. The power of persuasion that had beaten in vain against Mary's resistance left her impotent. Suddenly she lost the desire to win the girl to herself.

"Very well," she said. "Here is thirty pounds in this envelope. I cannot send you more till next March. It will be enough to provide you with a little ready money to pay

for your journey should you decide to come home again after all."

"Oh, Aunt Lena. Thirty pounds. Can you really spare so much?"

Lena did not attempt to answer the question.

"Where shall I send you more, when I have it?" she asked as Mary thrust the packet into the laces of her bosom, pushing them down under the tight-fitting bodice, so that no tell-tale corner should betray her treasure.

"I—I—don't know now," she stammered.

"Mary," said Lena, "have you changed your name? Is that one reason why we cannot write to you?"

Mary hung her head.

"Only to Mrs.——" she said, "Mrs. Towyn. They call me 'Mrs. Jim.'"

The door opened, and the aged and crippled waiter tottered into the room.

"Your cabman says the omnibus starts from the junction in half an hour and there is only just time to catch it," he croaked, "and the coachman from Bath can't keep his horses walking up and down any longer."

There was no help for it. Lena knew she wasted words as once more she entreated the girl to return with her. The most she could obtain was a promise to send some address where letters could reach her as soon as she was back in London again, and the renewed assurance of Mary's confidence that, though for the moment she had trials to endure, she could face them in the certainty that they would soon be over.

Mary's carriage, with the footman holding the door open and the coachman turning a slightly insolent stare on her from the box as she stepped into it, hid the cab in which Lena was to travel to the junction from sight. She stood on the doorstep of the hotel waving good-bye to Mary, who leaned out of the carriage window kissing her hand. As the landau drove off, swaying slightly on its high curved

springs, Lena came to a full sense of her defeat. When her cab drew up, the old and dismal horse seemed to be hardly of the same species as the glossy, well-fed animals that had already vanished into the twilight. Inside, her feet on the dirty straw, Lena sat upright, not daring to lean back lest she touch the damp, tattered lining at the back of her seat. She smiled grimly at the contrast. It was not to be wondered at that Mary had chosen to return to Bath.

CHAPTER IX

COURT MOURNING

I

Mary gave no sign till March ; then, just before Lady Day, she wrote a short, affectionate letter saying that she was in no need of her allowance, and was, "quite soon now," going to have a little house of her own.

"It is to have such a pretty name," she wrote. "Lilac Lodge, Acacia Road, and there are two lilac-bushes in the garden, and it has a balcony and shutters just like a chalet. Do not send any letters to me there, as there will only be painters and paperhangers in it for a long time. I am to travel till it is ready in May."

A month later a stereoscope, with an album of double views of Italian scenes and cities, arrived through a firm of international carriers. It bore the label of a Roman shop, but there was no card or message to be found in the packet, though Miss Martin searched through every scrap of paper and canvas when it had been undone.

"The dear girl is evidently growing more sensible," she pronounced, as she fitted the instrument together and selected a view of St. Peter's for inspection. "I daresay we have misjudged Mrs. Veale's influence. This is by far the most suitable gift she has chosen for us so far."

Lena sighed. It had not been possible to be entirely frank with Christie about the interview with Mary at the "Bull and Crown" on the Bath Road. She had told what she could, and Miss Martin had drawn her own charitable conclusions.

"So long as she is happy and has not forgotten us, we must be content to wait until she returns to us of her own accord," she said. "After all, it was we who sent her away."

The stereoscope was a great success. It stood on the parlour table for the entertainment of visitors, and formed the final inducement needed to drive Miss Martin into that visit to the oculist at Exeter she had been putting off for so many months. Fitted with a new pair of spectacles, Miss Martin curtailed her Sunday afternoon nap by at least half an hour while she gazed at the cypress walks of the Ville d'Este ("So solid, so full of shadow and sunlight, I could almost think I was walking there myself, Lena") or looked up from a view of the Bay of Naples declaring that in another minute she should expect the smoke of Vesuvius to spread into the dark umbrella shape described by those who have witnessed the eruptions of this mountain.

Having made herself mistress of the complete series of views, and refreshed her memory of the wonders of Italian art and nature by re-reading the works of that interesting but rather dogmatic young man, Mr. John Ruskin, Miss Martin began to experience the qualms of conscience. Was it, she reflected, altogether kind, or even just, to keep so much instructive pleasure to themselves?

"We have not shown our new *acquisition* to any of our friends," she informed Lena. "I feel that many of them who, in common with us, are debarred from the advantages of foreign travel, should be allowed to share our delight in this new pleasure. Besides," she added, with one of those sudden leaps to the unspoken thought in Lena's mind that still could astonish her, "there is no *reason* why we should not say that Mary has sent it to us."

"You make me think of the knight's move in chess," said Lena.

"I could never play chess. A game of draughts is, to my way of thinking, far more *feminine* and suitable. We might ask Madeline and dear Genevieve and Mrs. MacFarlane to inspect the views one afternoon next week."

Madeleine was only too glad to accept the invitation. Genevieve was on a visit to the Rectory, having left her husband behind in Malta, and she was finding the social relaxations of Queen's Beaton very dull after the gaieties of the regiment. Colonel Seymour's heir, a distant and not too friendly cousin, was now in residence at the Abbey, and neither of the sisters could bear to return to their own home on sufferance as mere afternoon callers. The Squire was growing old, and Mrs. Bartram had become so censorious that it was really difficult not to quarrel with her after half an hour of her society. So the prospect of an afternoon with Miss Martin's stereoscope was hailed, if not with enthusiasm, at least without repining.

"Lena will be there," said Madeleine, "and we do not need to look at the views all the time. Lizzie MacFarlane will do that."

However, the instrument, as Miss Martin called it, was a very fine one, and some of the views were coloured, a novelty that gave them real charm.

"What a lovely present," exclaimed Genevieve, dazzled by the crimson and yellow splendours of Sunset across the Bay of Naples.

"Yes," said Miss Martin, "our dear Mary has chosen well. Such variety, too."

There was a short pause. Then Madeleine asked, with a tone in which politeness struggled with surprise :

"You have good news of her, I hope ?"

"Very good," said Miss Martin. "She travels a great deal, and tells us that the crinoline is going out of fashion on the Continent."

Madeleine and Genevieve rustled in their wide flounces.

"Oh," cried Mrs. MacFarlane, "and I have just ordered a new Thomson. What a pity !"

"I daresay the new fashion will not spread into Wiltshire for a year or so," said Miss Martin. "Mary referred to the

Empress Eugénie and the ladies who take her as their model."

Lena bent over her embroidery. She had not realised how deeply Miss Martin had taken Madeleine's attitude towards Mary to heart, nor had she quite understood how little the innocence of Christie's mind fitted her to interpret the signs of so much of Mary's account of her life as they had discussed together. It was no use trying to stop her now Christie was enjoying the little sensation she had made. Lena could only keep silence, and hope that the conversation would take a turn and prevent any too pointed enquiries. But Mrs. MacFarlane was too much concerned about crinolines to let the matter rest.

"Oh, Miss Martin," she exclaimed, "I do hope she will be coming back soon! I did not know you had such good news of her. You never spoke of it before."

"We have always been ready to answer enquiries," said Miss Martin.

"Will she be back this summer? In time to tell us all what is to be the fashion for winter coats? I am to have a new one."

But Genevieve, who had, after all, come through Paris and London on her way to Queen's Beaton, was piqued at being passed over as an arbiter of fashion in this way.

"I think your niece—it is of your niece we are speaking?" she said, turning to Lena—"has exaggerated. Crinolines are positively enormous still among the really well dressed though the hoop comes lower now. Thomson has a new shape out."

"Perhaps Mary is living a little out of the fashionable world," murmured Madeleine.

"Not at all," said Miss Martin sharply, and took a deep breath.

Before she could launch on any further revelations, Lena spoke:

"Mary is travelling at present. I think Genevieve will be able to give us all the news we need about the fashion,"

she said. "I am glad to think I shall be in the fashion myself if the upper hoop has really vanished. I always take it out of my new Thomsons as it is."

"Poor Papa noticed that," said Madeleine. "He said, only the last time he came over, that you never looked so like a balloon as the rest of us. He always admired you so much, Lena."

"He was my very kind friend," said Lena.

There was a little silence. Madeleine had driven Mary out of the conversation. Lena could not but be grateful to that enmity which had saved the reputation it would not knowingly be Madeleine's business to befriend, from whatever indiscretion Miss Martin's excitement might have betrayed her into making.

Genevieve, now in full possession of the conversational field, began to talk of the fashionable world of which she seemed to know a great deal. She had spent part of her holiday with Lady Dale, and was full of the kind of gossip Lena would have expected that lady to collect.

"My cousin Alfred is at Cambridge. He says the Prince is very gay, but not much of a cricketer."

"Is it true that he is secretly married?" breathed Mrs. MacFarlane.

Miss Martin interposed.

"We will not mention such a thing," she said. "The heir to the throne cannot be secretly married."

"I am sure it is not true," Genevieve soothed the old lady. "But, talking of secret marriages, they say there is a lovely creature who *may* be the Duchess of Merioneth. She goes by the name of Mrs. Jim. Lady Gervaise is furious. Everyone knows she means him to marry Miss Knowltyne, the great heiress. The old Duke left the estate very much encumbered."

"It will be a good thing when he is married," observed Madeleine. "He has broken too many hearts. Why, even Ettie frets at times because he never comes to see her now."

"I suppose he will not live at the Castle again," said

Mrs. MacFarlane, repeating for the twentieth time a speculation that had occupied the Queen's Beaton tea-tables for a month past.

"He will have to be a Whig now," said Madeleine, "and take his seat in the House of Lords, and it would never do for him to be at the Castle with all those French pretenders and Papists who visit Lady Gervaise. Richard was quite distressed about it again last week. Some fresh political trouble, I think. He told me that when the Emperor and Empress were in England, years ago, it was well known that a plot to assassinate him had been hatched by some Orléanists who actually stayed at Malquoits."

"They were far enough from London in any case," said Lena, glad that the talk had drifted into these exciting if nebulous regions.

"You forget the electric telegraph, Lena," said Miss Martin sternly. "I am told it is possible to explode a bomb of dynamite at a distance of one hundred miles by means of electricity."

James Towyn and his problematic Duchess were forgotten, as was the stereoscope, while the party, with flushed cheeks and glowing eyes, discussed the marvels of science, the depravity of assassins, and the uncertainty of human life. Soon they reached the authentic details of the last hours of the Duchess of Kent, which Genevieve had had direct from a lady-in-waiting and which little Mrs. MacFarlane was able to corroborate, so far as the description of the symptoms went, from things the doctor had often told her about the final stages of the same trouble in his professional experience.

Lena ceased to take any active part in the conversation. She listened without any great interest to the themes that occupied the others, and wondered if it were true, as some cynics have asserted, that marriage has a deteriorating effect on the female intelligence. Five years ago, Madeleine and Genevieve would not have been able to pass an afternoon in such chit-chat as this. They were far more intelligent as girls of fifteen than as matrons of twenty-one. Lena

wondered that Miss Martin could listen so indulgently ; could even take part with such evident interest in it all. Of course, Christie might at any moment pull herself up in an access of unexpectedness and take exception to some statement, some opinion no more frivolous or unconsidered than those she had welcomed and agreed with. Christie was so incalculable. Lena was aware of something very like irritation with Christie this afternoon. She had broken the rule of silence tacitly accepted by them with regard to Mary. She had forced the subject of her absence into the forefront of their talk. She had opened the way for whatever Madeleine might have heard or conjectured to be confided to Genevieve. It was incredibly stupid of Christie. Had she really misunderstood the implications of Mary's situation ? Had Lena mistaken her kindly and charitable comments on such facts as they possessed for a real ignorance of their significance ?

Mary had put constraint between them ; had she put misunderstanding also ? Or was Lena herself becoming too reserved, too willing to let a half-truth, a false evasion, take its own chance of misinterpretation ? Shielding Mary, was she being disloyal to Miss Martin ? Was her irritation at this quite natural exchange of news and comment between the travelled Genevieve and the secluded ladies of Castle Gate nothing but an old maid's censorious jealousy of three young women, and an older one who had kept her heart young and eager and responsive ? Lena tried to think so ; tried to condemn herself and not the company she was in ; tried to shake off the sense of a coming disaster that threw a gloom over her spirit and made the talk of her friend and their three young guests seem cruel and foolish and charged with intentional spite.

2

" October 20th.

" DEAREST AUNT LENA AND AUNT CHRISTIE,—You will be surprised to hear that I write from *la coquette ville de*

Torquay where I have come to get rid of my cough. I have been very neglectful, I know, in not writing to you before this, but I have waited in the hope of giving you all my news, and good news. And now everything has to be put off for many reasons, but chiefly because I must be quite well before I can hope to lead a settled life. So I am, for the present, in very comfortable rooms, with an excellent landlady, and Bella has found me a very good maid, who pushes me out in a bath chair when the morning is sunny, just as though I were little Ettie in her perambulator, and in the afternoon I go for a little walk.

"I am reading *Garibaldi*, by Miss Braddon, and have just finished *The Woman in White*. Will you write and tell me how you both are, and address your letter under cover to Tonks, my maid, who will call for it at the post-office, as we may have to move from these rooms if the lady who is coming in on the ground floor is disturbed by us. She may not like Agnès, my white poodle, who is rather a spoil pet.

"With warmest love, and hoping that you are both quite well and happy,

"Your affectionate

"MARY."

"November 3rd.

"DEAR AUNT LENA,—A thousand thanks for your long letter, and to Aunt Christie for the horehound lozenges, which will be very useful at night. I am much better, and do not go out in my perambulator any more. Soon I hope I shall be allowed to return to London. The house you ask about is standing empty, but Bella will try to let it to a friend, as I do not expect to be living there when I go back to town. Next week I am to have a visit, and then I shall know better what my future is to be. I have finished *Peg Woffington*, and am sending for *The Cloister on the Hearth*. Please thank Aunt Christie for advising me to read *Ravenshoe*. I have made a set of toilet mats in very

fine crochet-cotton with blue beads ; when I have finished the pincushion I think the effect will be very pretty.

" There is a shop in the town where they sell views of Torquay mounted for the stereoscope. You will be amused to find that Torquay has its Strand and its London Bridge, and to see how unlike these are to their namesakes.

" It will be better not to answer this letter, as I may not be here very much longer.

" With much love,

" Your devoted and affectionate

" MARY."

" She sounds lonely," said Miss Martin.

" It might be possible to find her in Torquay," said Lena.

But it was no use going to Torquay in search of a Mary who, even now, made excuses for concealing her exact whereabouts, nor did it seem any more useful to speculate on the identity and power of the visitor on whom so much depended. Lena could not believe that Christie did not know. She had grown obstinate in her reserve ever since her return from the " Bull and Crown." She had told Christie too little then for it to be possible to tell her all she knew and feared now.

But the week went by and became a fortnight and no further letter arrived from Torquay. The suspense and anxiety were fretting to both ladies. Lena could not meet the look of questioning sympathy with which Christie would hand her her letters when she unlocked the painted, iron letter-box by the front door after breakfast every day. The delicacy of Miss Martin's forbearance, the tacit assumption that she knew as much as Lena knew, and shared to the full in all her concern over the mysterious withdrawal of the half confidence Mary had given, now irritated where once they would have calmed her state of mind. To her warped and fretful thought, Miss Martin's

patience became stupidity ; her innocence and goodwill seemed no better than credulous indulgence. Christie did not name or blame James Towyn, because what had once seemed no worse than a romantic eccentricity was really an almost imbecile infatuation for Lady Gervaise. So for hours Lena's repining thoughts would turn the sweetness of friendship into the bitter ashes of a fire almost quenched by the damp mists of suspicion and fatigue.

Then some small endearing incident of their common life ; some whimsicality of Miss Martin's speech or behaviour ; the chance word of an outsider's affection, or the returning tide of her own, would wipe away the cloud from Lena's heart, and she would love and be friends with Christie as though Mary had never come to trouble their industrious peace.

3

Madeleine went back to London with Genevieve to stay with Lady Dale for three weeks before Christmas, taking Ettie and Nurse with her. She was expected home again with Georgina on the twenty-first. " Though why," said Miss Martin, " she chooses the shortest day of the year for so long a journey I cannot understand."

Ever since the stereoscope's party Miss Martin had been increasingly critical of Madeleine. It was, Lena knew, her way of showing sympathy for Mary.

" I suppose Georgina's school breaks up on that day," Lena ventured.

" Madeleine should never have sent Georgina away to school, at so great a distance, too. There was no *necessity* for it. You see the consequences."

One of the immediate consequences of Madeleine's absence was that the Rector, lonely in the large house without his wife and children, came up to the Little Chantry two or three times a week with news from Madeleine's letters, and spent an hour over the tea-cups in talk with the

two ladies. He enjoyed discussing the latest volume of Mr. Thomas Carlyle's *History of Frederick the Great* with Lena,, to the accompaniment of sniffs of derision from Miss Martin, who considered this author uncouth and unsettling. At her request he sometimes read aloud in his beautiful and measured voice from *In Memoriam* or *The Idylls of the King*. They spoke of the morning's news. Mr. Malory was concerned about the Civil War between the Northern and Southern States of America, in preparation for which Miss Martin had sent to London for two extra copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as there was already a waiting-list for it. The illness of the Prince Consort did not alarm them much. Indeed, they hardly spoke of it at all with Mr. Malory. They preferred to take Mrs. MacFarlane's quasi-professional view on the daily bulletin every morning, when she stepped across Castle Gate on her way down to the Square and spent a few solemn but not unpleasant moments in the library explaining what the doctor thought of it. Mr. Malory, when the news became serious, did, indeed, express his opinion that the poor fellow had overworked himself with all his schemes for the International Exhibition. He was seriously trying to persuade Miss Martin and Miss Quibell to join them in visiting the Exhibition during the coming summer. It was, however, in a letter to Lena from Madeleine in London that they gathered the full gravity of the case.

"Aunt Amelia has just come in from calling on Lady Knowltyne to congratulate her on Lasceline's engagement to the Duke of M. Aunt A. met the K.s in Rome at Easter and has known of the affair for some time. But it was only settled last week, and the wedding was fixed for January. But now they have had to put it all off, because the Court will go into mourning if poor Prince Albert dies, as he may do at any moment, which means they can't possibly dream of a wedding until after Easter. Lady Gervaise is furious. Lady K. has been quite shocked

at the way she refers to the Queen, as though she had no right to the throne. Lady K. says her references to the P.C. and all the Royal Family are actually coarse. Did you know that she always takes a wreath and puts it on that ugly little statue of Charles I on the twenty-ninth of January? Such an odd, morbid thing to do! Lady K. says Lasceline dislikes Lady G. so much that it was quite difficult to persuade her to marry the Duke, though, of course, she is deeply in love with him. How well we understand all her feelings, though, of course, Genevieve never mentions all that now. Fortunately, the Merioneth family has always been Whig, so Lady G. and her old-fashioned ideas will go for nothing. Besides, she is an R.C., which will make a difference. I suppose we shall not have the Duke and Duchess at Malquoits until Lady G. dies—if then."

Lena handed the letter across the table to Miss Martin. It would be worse than useless to keep it from her even if in her unhappy state she had for the moment realised how much Madeleine's references to Lady Gervaise would annoy her.

Miss Martin read the letter twice, and Lena saw her face grow grey as she pored over the sheets of paper. At last she put it down.

"I could not have believed that Madeleine could be so vulgar and revengeful," she said.

"Oh," said Lena, "then you do know."

"I have always known," said Miss Martin, with dry lips. "Did I not send Mary away in the first instance? If we had kept her with us this might not have happened. This disgrace—this misery."

"No—no, Christie. She would have gone from here, from there. Nothing could have prevented it. If she had gone from us here she would not have come back. Now she may."

"If it is not too late," sobbed Miss Martin. "If it is not

too late. I sent her away to prevent awkwardness, and now she is ill and unhappy and we do not know where she may be found."

"I will go to Torquay. I shall find her there. She must have been remarked. So lovely, and with a little white dog. There will be some way of finding her."

"She is not at Torquay. She has left Torquay. If she had remained there she would have written. Lena, you can never forgive me! Mary was yours, and I sent her away because she was an annoyance. Because I am a foolish, wicked old woman!"

"Dear Christie, never that. I was willing for her to go. I am alone to blame. I have not won her confidence. I never gave her true love—freely. She knew it. She did not trust me. She could not tell me what was in her heart, and I saw it there and was too proud, too dull to find the way to help her. It is I alone who am to blame."

"Oh, Lena, all these months we have hidden from one another. The situation was delicate, it was difficult, but we have made it harder. We have not trusted one another. There has," said Miss Martin, drying her eyes suddenly, "there has always been an evasion of truth between us. It has been wrong."

But, though the barriers were down at last, there was to be no recapitulation of events, no filling in of the silences and the evasions that had surrounded their mutual, unspoken knowledge of Mary's fall. Before Christie's tears were wholly dry, while Lena's heart still beat faster for the fear the news had brought, and the joy that the shadow between her and her friend had dissolved in that deeper shadow, Matilda was upon them.

"The library is half full of people," she gasped importantly. A statement they rightly interpreted as meaning that three or four subscribers at most had come in.

Later in the day the news of the Prince Consort's death came by telegram, and once more the little house was

shaken by the tolling of the church bell, its forty-two reverberations seeming to last for an eternity, and to continue through the winter dusk, echoing at wider intervals far into the night.

4

Lena did not go to Torquay. Miss Martin's conviction that Mary was no longer there seemed in all probability to be only too correct, but, even so, she would have gone, difficult as it might have been to get away from Queen's Beaton for the three days such an expedition involved at that time of year. But on the fifteenth of December Miss Martin, who had been complaining of a pain in her chest, grew worse, and by the next morning was definitely ill with an attack of bronchitis. For a week Lena nursed her, with the kind but rather excited aid of Mrs. MacFarlane, while Matilda dealt with invalid cooking and the whole of the housework and attempted to run the library as well. But on the third day the patient, overhearing a very loud whispering outside her door, and enquiring what it was that Matilda was hissing about, became so excited on being told that she wanted the second volume of *Guesses at Truth* for Mr. Simpson, the curate, that the library had to be closed altogether. A notice was put up on the side of the porch in Castle Gate announcing that all business was suspended until New Year's Day. On hearing this, Miss Martin's temperature went down half a degree and she fell into a natural sleep. So much better was she by the twenty-first, when Madeleine and the little girls came back from London, that Lena went down to the Rectory for half an hour to welcome them home again. She was tired with a week of sleepless or disturbed nights and the anxiety she had been through. The little interlude, though pleasant enough, was not of a nature to help her to forget or to relax while it lasted. Mr. Malory walked up the hill with her just before seven, and noticed how pale and listless she seemed.

"This has been more of a strain than you will admit," he said, as he left her, "and I am afraid there is another anxiety of which we have not spoken lately."

"We will not speak of it now," said Lena. "It is no better. We have no news."

"I was afraid so. You will let me help you how or when I can?"

"We may need your help in a special way, if she should return home."

Mr. Malory looked startled.

"You think that possible?"

"She may have no alternative."

"It will be difficult for her—for you."

"We shall need help."

They stood in the study, the room under Mary's empty bedroom, used by Lena for seeing any callers since Miss Martin had been ill, because it was farthest away from the sick-room; but, even so, they spoke in undertones, hushed by the thought of the invalid upstairs and by the sense of secrecy and caution imposed upon them by the nature of their conversation. Even with him, the Rector, her parish priest and trusted friend, Lena was betrayed by the need to put Mary between him and Madeleine. She felt a sense of guilt, as though they were plotting together; an oppression, as though she, safe in her own home, and not Mary straying in the dangerous world, were the sinner.

"We shall need help," she repeated, and the colour that flamed in her cheek was for her own boldness in insisting on a protection it would cost him some private discomfort to offer.

Mr. Malory saw the painful flush, and did not misunderstand its cause.

"You shall have all the help I can give, whenever it is needed," he said. "The best help I can give you to-night is to beg that you will rest now, and not break down your own reserves of strength and courage. You are pale and

worn with fatigue. You tell me that you will sleep in bed to-night—in your own room—a real rest.”

“I did so last night. I tried to, that is. Christie is no longer in need of a night nurse,” she said ; adding, “I am so glad you have Madeleine and the children back with you once more, though we have been the gainers by your loneliness.”

She must quickly repair the link that had broken when she had exacted and obtained that promise to help her if Mary should return ; for that help, they both knew, would be against Madeleine, who could not be on their side of any battle that might have to be fought for the girl James Towyn had abandoned.

Mr. Malory departed, and Lena went upstairs to settle Christie for the night. But when, soon after nine o'clock, she left her patient, drowsy and comfortable, Lena did not follow the Rector's counsel and go to bed herself. She went downstairs and, after discussing household arrangements for a few minutes with Matilda, who was, candle in hand, on her way upstairs, she set herself to revive the fire that was dying in the study grate. She cleared the feathery ashes from between the lower bars with the tip of a Turkish bayonet once given her by Colonel Seymour when he had come upon her coaxing the schoolroom fire at the Abbey into a final glow. Then, with a pair of black coal-tongs, like a large snub-nosed pair of scissors, she gathered scraps of live coal and crisp grey clinkers from the ruins of the day's burning and built them pyramid wise together over the still glowing embers in the centre of the grate. She did not use the little wooden bellows that hung from its hook beside the crimson woollen bell-pull. It was her art and vanity to make a fire live without their aid. Soon the flame, drawn up through the hollow cone she had raised, began to lick the sponge-like cinders with a faint lapping of its golden tongue. Lena rose from her knees by the fender and drew her chair closer in to the hearth. Her work was accomplished ; the fire would now gain and increase. Soon there

would be a crimson glow where there was black greyness and a creeping flame. Outside the house the silence was absolute. No one stirred in Castle Gate this December night. The church clock struck no hour. Mr. Malory had had the chimes taken off for Miss Martin's sake earlier in the week, and they would not be put on again until Christmas Day. In two days' time now. Lena bent forward in her chair. The low, book-lined room was warm about her, but she drew her shoulders together with the shiver of fatigue and apprehension. The staircase still creaked and shook after the passage of Matilda's mounting forth ; a cricket chirped so strongly across the passage from the kitchen hearth that its shrill cry reached her. Matilda must have left the kitchen door open. A mouse gnawed softly in the rafters below the floor of Mary's bedroom. Up there the bed was made, a hot brick warmed the sheets, dry tinderwood and small pine-logs lay in the grate ready to be touched into flame. There were candles in the candlesticks, fresh damask on the towel-rail. The room was almost as it had been on that winter night two years ago when Mary had come there for the first time. Then it had glowed and sparkled with welcome ; now it waited ready, but unlit, without fire or flowers, expectant, but uncertain.

With that prescience that sometimes visits the over-wrought and over-tired, Lena waited for Mary, hearing the distant sound of wheels that were bringing her ; the slow footfall of a weary tread that seemed to draw nearer as the hours went by. In the half-dream of her vigil she saw a road, dark between banks of shovelled snow, and Mary's little hurrying figure running along it in hopeless, frantic haste. Then the figure grew, and changed. Its gait became slower ; it walked a few paces ahead of other figures. It raised its face in the dim light that fell between the clouds scurrying across the moon and was reflected from the snow-covered ground. Lena saw the gaunt and anxious face of Colonel Sevmour as it had never shown itself to her while he lived—

the face of the soldier in the black mid-winter of 1855, on some Crimean high road, before he had ever heard her name. It was the first time that any solitary brooding hour had brought his face before her. In her mind's eye other faces found themselves, one other face most constantly still ; but until now the idea of Colonel Seymour had never visualised itself. Now it was so clear in its unfamiliar aspect she could almost think his ghost beside her. She saw him now, not as the easy-going man of property, the indulgent father, the kind master of a score of destinies, her own included, as she had known him in life. Here in the half-dream of her solitude he showed himself stern, harassed, suffering less for himself than for those to whose anguish his could bring no comfort ; a soldier at grips with the grinding misery of war in an alien and hostile winter, not failing in courage or duty or pity. She saw him now with the imagination that had failed her when he was alive. Then he had presented no more than the surface of his civilian existence to her not very sympathetic consideration, a kind, rather dull man, enjoying the ease he had wanted her to share with him.

Why should Colonel Seymour, dead and in his grave this year or more, return to her now, and in a guise that must soften her heart and bring her to a regret she had never felt while he lived ! She had in her own mind considered his honourable advances as an attempt on his part to add her lifelong devotion to the completion of the case with which he was already surrounded. With headstrong egotism she had refused to sacrifice her liberty to his comfort. So she had seen it then, when she had left the Abbey to come, not without some slight sense of self-approving austerity, to live in the comparatively narrowed circumstances of her present life. Now, at this strange hour, when her thoughts should all be for Christie, who was ill, and for Mary, who was out somewhere in the threatening world, he came to melt her heart with the knowledge of a simple heroism, a patient courage she had never stopped to consider, when,

had she realised them, she might have been touched to pity and to love. She was wide awake now ; the mists had cleared from her dreaming sight. She saw only the lamp-lit room and the brown array of the bookshelves ; the fire that now glowed clear and perfect, a rose of heat pulsing beneath the transparent shells of the incandescent cinders. Now she knew, now at last she saw clear, all her own share in the disaster of Mary's life. It was not Felix who came, nor yet James Towyn, to show her in a vision where her fault had lain. The end had been implicit before the beginning of Mary's tale. If Lena had been less proud, less sure that her old fidelity to a love that had in the last test failed her was a virtue ; if she had been humble and loving and willing to give, instead of being unwilling to take, when Colonel Seymour asked as well as offered kindness, Mary would have come to the Abbey ; have been safe there from that chance of encounter that had led her to ruin.

James Towyn the libertine had had no qualms over the seduction of the little nursery governess, the pretty girl who helped her aunts in the needlework shop. But Mary, safe from all invasion of Malquoits, in the secure and happy state Lena could have given her at the Abbey, would have been inaccessible to him. Indeed, if Lena herself, rather than Lady Dale, had, as the girls' stepmother, taken charge of Madeleine and Genevieve during their first weeks in London while Mary was still at school in Lausanne, Genevieve's little tragic comedy might have ended differently. She had found fault with both girls because they fell short of the ideals in thought and conduct she had presented to them while they were under her charge. But she had abandoned them deliberately to an influence she knew to be unsatisfactory, and had chosen her own freedom in preference to what she must still consider as their real advantage. So, her accusing thought. She had taken refuge in the bright friendship, the easy activities, of life with Christie Martin that she might the more consistently encourage the ghost of an unconsummated passion to haunt her with its assurance

of a glory she had forgone. In the stubborn pride of her heart she had preferred to live as though still affianced to Felix von Hohenfels rather than forget that long-since perished dream in the reality of becoming Marcus Seymour's wife. Had she so chosen, she might now have attained the full completion of womanhood, have been the mother of a son whose father might, even now, have been alive to share her pride and joy. Deeper and deeper it went, the sword of her self-accusation, plunging into the already admitted betrayal that had held her back from interference, and had placed a false delicacy between her and the beleaguered girl. She had made in Mary the vicarious sacrifice, sent her away to be the scapegoat of her own unsatisfied nature. She sat there, still free, still intact, the mistress of a body already beginning to wither, and looked at the desolation of her soul. It was she and not James Towyn, not Lady Gervaise, who had driven Mary into the blind alley of a secret and spurious marriage, a cloaked dishonour that had now come to its ruinous exposure. She had nursed the exaltation without facing the actualities of passion. She herself stood condemned, not Mary, whom she had betrayed. Soon, soon now her victim would return to her and face her with the ruin for which in this lonely and self-accusing hour she made herself responsible.

The hollow cone of the fire falling together with a soft crash brought her out of her reverie. The stillness, broken by the ticking of the embers indoors, carried another sound in its deeps outside. A latch clicked, a footstep sounded on the gravel. Lena rose and went to the window, drawing back the curtain. The lamplight fell across the garden, showing the straw-wrapped stems of the rose-trees standing straight and frosted in the frozen earth. Something stirred in the blackness beyond the streaming lamplight. Then a figure moved into view. A white, weeping face came close to the lattice. Lena rushed to the unbolted door and threw it open to the night.

5

"Her very name," said Miss Martin, "was warning enough, to say nothing of the dishonesty of dyed hair."

Miss Martin's own hair was tied back from her face with a tartan ribbon, so that it made a halo of short grey curls round her head. She sat propped by pillows, wrapped in a grey woollen nightingale, with a bed-table in front of her, and looked, as she ate her bread and milk from a blue and white china bowl, like a wizened and over-intelligent child.

Mary's return, far from causing a relapse, had been the signal for her convalescence. She had actually come downstairs for dinner on Christmas Day, and had continued to do so, only going to bed just before supper. Mary, in her room at the other end of the gallery, was now supposed to be the greater invalid, for she stayed upstairs all day, and Miss Martin went in to sit with her every afternoon. It was not that Mary was ill enough to be in bed. After the first long sleep of exhaustion she seemed better, though she was thin and listless, and had a troublesome cough. Her seclusion was not entirely dictated by her state of health. She had come back without any luggage, and the clothes in her old hair trunk no longer fitted her. Mary had grown and changed in the two years since her first coming to Queen's Beaton. The little brown travelling-dress she had worn under her old brown cloak when she came back was too narrow in the chest and too wide at the waist for her now. It had been made for someone else—for a slim girl who had grown out of it. Mary was a woman now : she could not be seen in the library or about the house until she had a dress to fit her ; one, moreover, that would not be recognised by the keen eyes that would inspect her as in any way based on garments they had seen before. Even from her sick-bed Miss Martin had grasped the importance of this detail. Fortunately she had by her a dress-length of black poplin that, had she not been taken ill, would have been sent to the dressmaker to be made up in order that she, in common

with the rest of the town, might show her sympathy with the Royal widow by wearing black at church and during business hours in the emporium. Now that she would not be going to church for weeks to come, and would only sit in the library on very fine days, a grey dress, with a black bow here and there and her black cashmere shawl, would do very well for her; so Mary must have the poplin and make it up herself. She and Miss Martin together could work the little Willcox & Gibbs machine. There would be no flounces or trimming, and Matilda would spare an hour one afternoon for the heavy work of running a triple row of chain-stitch round the hem of the skirt. It would be slow work, but she and Mary could keep warm and quiet together upstairs. And, till the dress was ready, Lena must not allow any visitors to pass beyond the library doors.

Thus, with an adroit mixture of pretexts, Miss Martin kept Mary's return a secret, and gave her an engrossing occupation for mind and hand, so that there should be no possibility of talk outside, and less danger of unrelieved sorrow within the house for a day or two.

"We must have breathing time," gasped Miss Martin from her pillows as soon as Lena had broken the news of Mary's return to her while the girl was still asleep the next morning. "And Matilda's lips must be sealed."

"I have told Matilda," said Lena, "that you will fall ill again if she tells anyone that Mary has come back until we give her permission to do so. She thinks there is magic at the bottom of this—that Mary has brought some witch's nostrum with her to cure you—and I have encouraged her to go on thinking so. Nothing but the fear of witchcraft would make her hold her tongue."

"We shall need to guard our own," said Miss Martin, "and Mary may not be able to help us."

An hour later, when Dr. MacFarlane came, he guessed their secret.

"Miss Martin is worrying no more," he said. "She is well again. A little care, a few sunny days, and she will be

up and about. I will send her in a tonic in an hour's time."

"You will tell *no* one that I have recovered," said Miss Martin. "My illness is to last at least a week longer."

"Aye, aye, Miss Martin." The doctor understood his patient. "You shall have no callers. I'll tell Lizzie that your life may be despaired of at any moment. And the Lord knows that's true of any one of us."

So little Mrs. MacFarlane went about the business of guarding Miss Martin's secret by spreading the news of her expected demise, and Miss Martin took the first dose of her tonic and was well enough to have Mary in her bedroom the whole afternoon.

Thus it came to pass that such confidences as Mary had to make were made to Miss Martin and not to her aunt. Indeed, Lena had no time to draw them forth, with two people to nurse and the re-opened library to deal with single-handed. She had gathered no more from the exhausted girl on the night of her arrival than that she had not returned by way of Malquoits Park, but had obtained a lift from the junction to Queen's Beaton and had walked the rest of the way. No one had recognised her ; she had chosen the new road partly to escape recognition. There was no need to speak of her other reason for avoiding Malquoits and Queen Street, nor did Lena question her as to any of the circumstances that had led to her return. It was enough that she was there at last, and in need of warmth and refreshment. The practical business of getting her to bed with hot milk, hot-water bottles, and a fire in her room, occupied the whole of her attention that night. The rest must wait for time and opportunity ; and these, as it fell out, were Miss Martin's.

Matilda threw herself with the utmost zeal into the task allotted to her. For an hour every evening after the supper-things had been washed and put away the little house hummed with the whirring of the sewing-machine on the dining-room table, where Matilda placed it with solemn importance as soon as she had changed her apron and

removed her cap after washing up the supper-dishes. She had taken it for granted that Miss Mary's boxes had been stolen in London, a place well known to be little better than a den of thieves. The mixture of indignation against the wicked, and pride at sitting thus capless in the dining-room, spurred her to such feats of machining that skirt and bodice and sleeves were run up by the end of the week, and only the finishing stitches and the buttonholes remained for the slower fingers upstairs. And, as they sat and sewed together, doing a little more each day, Mary told such parts of her story as she could find words for, not as one direct and continuous narrative, but in scenes and incidents, with admissions that cloaked the essential fact behind them, and evasions that betrayed the thing she sought to conceal. Then, when both Lena's charges were in bed for the night and she had time to sit alone with Miss Martin for half an hour, the story would be passed on to her, not as Mary had told, but as Miss Martin had understood it.

The villain—Lena must be careful not to lose sight of this—the real wrongdoer was Mrs. Veale, who had lured Mary from High Vinnals and exposed her to temptation. It was Mrs. Veale who had connived at the marriage ceremony that had taken place in the afternoon, knowing all the time that it was illegal, and keeping that knowledge from the poor children themselves.

"Christie, did they *both* believe it was all right?"

"Mary certainly did for some time. But," said Christie, betraying a knowledge of the world far beyond Lena's own, "he took her behind the scenes at the *Opéra Comique* soon after they reached Paris. And that," she added after a pause, "was *before* the old Duke's death."

"He also knew Mrs. Veale, Christie. It was he who sent her to High Vinnals."

"She should have refused the errand."

"He would have found another."

"Nothing can excuse that woman." Miss Martin had

chosen her standpoint : from it she would henceforward envisage any aspect of Mary's case. " She introduced herself to Mary, by letter, as the aunt of a school friend."

" That clearly was a subterfuge. But how did she arrive at the name of one of Mary's school friends ? How was it that Mary was taken in ? "

Miss Martin put her spoon down firmly.

" I shall not be able to finish my supper or to tell you anything if your spirit is carping. Mary needs *sympathy*. We must hear what she has to tell us in the *right* spirit or she will be discouraged and brood and be unhappy. I ask her no *disturbing* questions. I just say, ' Yes, dear, and what did he do next ' ? "

" Very well, Christina, I will follow your example. Yes, dear, what did she say next ? "

" She told me how very much she disliked cock-fighting."

" Christie ! "

" Disguised as a boy, of course, otherwise he could not have taken her. It was the beginning of her illness. The fatigue and strain and a heavy cold."

" Poor little Mary. She did it to please him."

" So flattered, so indulged ! There were many extenuating circumstances, and we know their affections are sooner lost and won." Miss Martin was growing elliptical rather than incoherent, and she emphasised every other word, a sure sign of fatigue. Lena bade her good night and left her. Before going to her own room, she slipped along the gallery to Mary's door. Her low knock evoked no answer, but, through the muffled snorting and whirring made by Matilda and the sewing-machine in the dining-room below, Lena thought she could hear a stifled cough and a gasp for breath that might easily be the intaking of a sob.

The black poplin dress was finished, and Mary, her hair restored to its former dressing in two coils above her ears,

sat, a white-faced, black-robed shadow, behind the long table in the library, making entries in the day-books and printing labels or checking lists just as she used to do. No one took very much notice of her return. Even Matilda's irrepressible story of the lost boxes stirred less than a nine days' wonder in Queen's Beaton. There had been gossip about Mary's disappearance, but her re-installment in the library dispelled the most interesting suspicions. Miss Martin, the curate's sister ; Miss Quibell, ex-governess in the best families, both regular churchgoers, would hardly, so the gossips told one another, countenance irregularity. The poor young woman's appearance was in itself a confirmation both of her illness and her respectability. No one could look at the pale face in which the dark ringed eyes seemed to grow larger and more mournful every day, or listen to the low short cough—three quick notes and a gasp—that interrupted Mary's speech from time to time, without fearing the worst. And fearing the worst, though exciting enough at the outset, loses interest as a daily occupation, especially when the victim does not succumb rapidly. Besides, there was the Royal funeral to be discussed,, and with it the proposal to commemorate the occasion by replacing the remains of an old window that had been only partially broken by the Covenanters in Cromwell's time, by one of those bright and cheerful stained glass pictures from Munich of which the Prince Consort had always been so fond. Mrs. Bartram, who had presented one of these to St. Alphage's at Beaton Clarence in memory of her niece, was taking an unusually active part in the advancement of this project, and Madeleine was in almost daily communication with Lady Dale with a view to ascertaining, if possible, whether a subject from the Old or the New Testament would be more likely to approach the late Consort's own Royal choice. Opinion among the subscribers was sharply divided between the Translation of Elijah and the Miracle of Cana of Galilee, both being capable of being considered as analogous with the life and

fate of the august departed. Miss Martin held very particular views about stained glass, and, as she grew stronger, took an increasingly firm stand with the Rector's faction, which upheld, against Mrs. Bartram's following, that none but New Testament subjects should be used in a Christian Church. Mrs. Bartram's party held that this view was tainted with Popery, thereby hitting a weak spot in Miss Martin's defences, as Mrs. Bartram knew perfectly well. It made Lena indignant to see how ruthlessly the Squire's wife, who was now too fat to walk and lived her days through in a bath chair, pressed home this mean advantage. Poor little Christie's weakness was a private concern of her own, and should not be canvassed in the semi-public manner adopted by Mrs. Bartram. Was the frequent reference to Miss Martin's well-known familiarity with ritualistic practices, and the opportunities she had at one time enjoyed of seeing Popery in high places and therefore at its most insidious worst, an indirect attack on her position as sheltering Mary? Lena did not allow herself to harbour this suspicion for more than an instant. She had been too glad to recognise how easily Mary had slipped back into the place they had made for her to give any prolonged consideration to the possibility of undercurrents of feeling and opinion that might only reach them as the faintest ripples on the surface of the disturbance her reappearance had caused. The policy of leaving all depths unplumbed in the interests of a smooth passage over the waters of social life was so universally accepted among women in those days that Lena, sincere and independent in her own dealings with herself, was hardly conscious of duplicity when she tried to assure herself that, as no gossip reached her ears, nobody thought twice about the events that had led up to Mary's resumption of her seat behind the long table in the library.

Mr. Malory, true to his promise, had not only been kind to Mary himself, but had come up to the library with Madeleine one morning and, without exactly prompting

her, had ensured by his presence at their meeting that Madeleine's behaviour to Miss Paradise should be friendly. But Lena noticed that when Mary asked after the little girls, Madeleine's assurance that they were both extremely happy, and better than they had ever been in their lives, was given with joyful emphasis, and was not followed by any suggestion that Mary should see her former pupils again.

Mrs. MacFarlane, no less determined, was more self-conscious in her manner of excluding Mary from participation in the activities they had shared.

"I won't ask Miss Paradise to sing with me again," she said rather fussily to Lena. "I am sure she is not well enough to do so, and these heavy chest colds are apt to be infectious, so the doctor tells me."

"I hope the change will do her good," said Lena, "and that when the warmer days come, and she is able to go out, her cough will disappear."

"Oh, yes, so do I:" Mrs. MacFarlane was a little confused. "The spring will cure her perhaps, and then she will be able to go away again."

"Perhaps," said Lena.

There was no shutting her eyes to the fact that Mary's presence was an embarrassment to their visitor. Nor was Mrs. MacFarlane the only person who was ill at ease. Little by little it became apparent that the library and emporium was doing less business in the New Year. One or two people whose subscriptions fell due in January failed to renew them. Mrs. Bartram sent a letter to announce her intention of getting a box direct from Mudie's in the future, instead of through Little Chantry House. The Misses Linden were known to have been to Exeter for the set of antimacassars they were embroidering for the bazaar that was to be held immediately after Easter in aid of the Prince Consort Memorial Window Fund.

Miss Martin put this defection down to her own illness and the lack of grit in the Misses Linden's character.

"Flora and Caroline Linden were always weak and changeable," she said. "They seldom finish any large piece of needlework. I shall not be at all *surprised* to be asked to begin half a dozen egg-cosies for them to make up at the last minute. Still, it is clear that I must take up the reins again. I shall tell Dr. MacFarlane that I resume my regular hours on Friday."

By the middle of February she had found another explanation for the continued slackness.

"Who would have imagined that here in Queen's Beaton the Prince Consort—and he was never *popular* with us—would have been mourned so sincerely as this," she remarked when the monthly balancing of accounts told its own tale. "Nothing but black and white embroidery is being done—and very little of that."

"And two more subscriptions have run out," said Lena.

"The weather," Miss Martin answered, "is so much milder, I think it will be a good thing for Mary to take a short walk every morning. She can rest after dinner. She is still very far from well."

"I do not think she will be able to walk far ; but we can send her out between eleven and twelve, and let her do her book lists on the dining-room table when the sun gets there after breakfast," said Lena.

The consequences of the change of routine were very different from anything either of the ladies had foreseen. Mary went out for an hour every morning, and certainly seemed a little less listless after a few days of mild February air. But one morning on her return she reported that Mr. Simpson, the curate, had stopped her in Market Square and asked why he never saw her in church nowadays.

"Mr. Simpson," said Miss Martin, "spends so much of his time doing Sunday-school and Mothers' Meeting work that he is apt to forget himself. I hope you told him your cough was still too frequent for you to think of disturbing his sermons with it."

"Oh, Aunt Christie," cried Mary, and laughed a little till her cough stopped her.

"I think you are the best person in all the world," she said when she regained her breath ; and then she began to cry.

7

Mr. Simpson, the curate, was not very popular in Queen's Beaton. He was neither a mystic like Thomas Martin, whom everyone had loved, nor a latitudinarian man of the world like the Rector, who was generally admired and liked. His views, which were evangelical, were stronger than his intelligence, but not so strong as his ambition. He had an unfailing sense of all that had been sadly amiss in his predecessor's tenure of the office it was clearly his business to make an occasion for much spiritual cleansing in the parish and a stepping-stone to higher things.

Mr. Simpson intended by precept and example to light a fire in Queen's Beaton that should be so visible at Beaton Clarence by the time the old Vicar either died or retired that there should be no doubt as to the person most fitted to succeed to that comfortable living. Beaton Clarence was in the stream of life—a conspicuous and much-frequented place, not a cul-de-sac like the old grey parish church at the top of Castle Gate. And Mr. Simpson himself took a very definite line—one that was likely to be noticed favourably in influential quarters. A militant orthodoxy, with unflinching adherence to the doctrine of eternal damnation, was the mainspring of his pulpit eloquence and the inspiration of his dealings with the indiscreet and habitual sinners whom the Rector was always so reluctant to rebuke.

"An active man, Simpson," Mr. Malory would admit when Mr. Simpson's energy had roused some parishioner to admire or protest. Sometimes he added, "We shall see him a bishop one day." On these occasions, if Madeleine were present, she would sigh and exclaim fondly :

"You have no ambition, Richard ; you are a perfect saint," and the Rector would tell her he was happy enough as an indolent sinner getting on in years.

Madeleine was secretly rather afraid of Mr. Simpson ; he was so very sure of Hell. She herself believed in Hell as a convenient way of disposing of the lower orders, and as a most useful answer to the question, "Where do naughty little girls go to ?" when Ettie was disobedient or greedy. She had never quite liked to mention this place to Georgina, having noticed that the Rector never spoke of it himself. He seemed, Madeleine thought, to be almost as reserved about Hell as Lena used to be, though he never went so far as Lena had done once at Queen's Beaton, when she had been angry because Genevieve had been found reading a tract called *The Liar's Doom*. Lena had taken this piece of literature—a green leaflet with a woodcut of Satan frying liars over a brisk fire—and had torn it to pieces, saying she would not have them seen with such vulgar trash in their hands. She had made them read *The Pilgrim's Progress* instead. Later, Madeleine knew that Lena read and admired the works of Mr. Charles Kingsley, and that both Lena and dear Richard had been equally distressed about a certain Dr. Maurice who had got into trouble for saying he did not believe in Hell at all. They had, at one time, talked of nothing else. As for Miss Martin, she went farther if not so deeply into the question by dismissing it as one no really well-bred person should mention, a decision the Rector was always quoting. It was the likelihood that Mr. Simpson would mention it that made it so difficult to ask him to any but the most carefully selected dinner-parties, though Richard said he would grow out of this habit when he realised that influential people as a rule did not welcome infant damnation as a dinner-table topic.

But Mr. Simpson did not confine his attention to the problem of iniquity in infants. There were other branches of mortal sin less controversial in their nature, and as rife in Queen's Beaton as in any small town or country parish the

world over. Mr. Simpson was a great rebuker of drunkenness, and he could bring home to a young woman the everlasting consequences of the offence known under the euphemism of "getting into trouble" so vividly that one unfortunate creature to whose affliction he had ministered had to be taken to the county asylum. She died in giving birth to a child which the curate refused to baptise. This had been the occasion for a good deal of disturbance. Mr. Malory had driven over to the asylum to christen the child himself, not without a secret hope that so public a repudiation of his curate's attitude would drive the disciplinarian to resign. But Mr. Simpson was not the man to withdraw from a sound position because his tenure of it inconvenienced other people. Besides, he had a following in the parish where his devotion to duty and the minute knowledge he acquired of the private lives of the lower orders caused him to be respected, and gave him considerable power. All this had happened long before Madeleine came to be mistress of the Rectory. Mr. Malory, if he did not exactly forget the quarrel, never told his young wife about it. He had settled down into the comfortable division of parish work that suited him, and, so far as he could judge, satisfied the majority of his parishioners, and he had allowed himself to arrive at regarding poor Simpson as rather a joke. He left the curate a free hand and went his own way, without any great attempt at co-operation with him.

It was, therefore, a surprise to Madeleine to be informed, one morning when the Rector had ridden over to Beaton Clarence, that Mr. Simpson was in the drawing-room and would like to see her on a matter of parish business.

Mr. Simpson did not beat about the bush.

"I have come," he said, "to you rather than to the Rector, Mrs. Malory, because the trouble affects a lady well known and, I believe, dear to you. I refer to Miss Quibell."

"Miss Quibell!" exclaimed Madeleine. "But she is in

no great trouble—Miss Martin is quite herself again now.”

“The trouble in question affects Miss Martin as well,” said Mr. Simpson, with an increase of gloom.

“Oh, dear! I know nothing of this. Please tell me at once, Mr. Simpson.”

“It is a question of conscience with very worthy people—a question I have been asked to decide for those who look to me for guidance. A very grave question indeed. In short,” said Mr. Simpson, with a burst of frankness, “Mr. Dobbs, the baker, and Mr. Brentwood, the butcher, doubt very much whether they can continue to supply the ladies in question with bread and meat.”

“But—but—they are not—they cannot be in reduced circumstances?”

“That may come. At present it is on moral grounds. I also”—Mr. Simpson cleared his throat—“I also am in doubt as to whether it may not be my bounden duty to advise Matilda Jones not to remain in their service.”

“Matilda will never leave Miss Martin. Why should she, unless she marries?”

“No man who respects himself is likely to marry Matilda Jones while the present state of affairs continues.”

“But——”

“There is no ‘but’ about it. Miss Quibell—and, to lesser degree, Miss Martin—is responsible for the presence of an open and unrepentant sinner in our midst.”

Madeleine flushed. She felt angry with Mr. Simpson, not so much on the grounds that he was attacking her friends as because he had dared to speak to her of a matter that was even less suited for feminine consideration than the topic of Hell fire.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, with all the dignity a person who knows perfectly well what is in question may command.

“Then,” said Mr. Simpson, “I will be clear. It is widely

known that, during the eighteen months of her absence from Queen's Beaton, Miss Paradise has been guilty of irregular conduct."

"It is not known to me," Madeleine protested.

"It is known that you dismissed her from your employment because of the freedom she permitted herself with a certain gentleman."

"Mr. Simpson," cried Madeleine, now thoroughly angry, "I cannot allow you to discuss my private business in this way."

"Then it is true."

"Of course it is not true. Miss Paradise only came here for a few months, in order to prepare my stepdaughter for school."

"It is known that Miss Georgina was not allowed to see this unfortunate young woman during her Christmas holidays."

"The child had quite forgotten Miss Paradise in her new interests. Children are very fickle and forgetful. Besides, I did not care for her to visit a sick-room."

"Your own little girl has not seen her since she has been well enough to go about, nor have you invited her to the Rectory."

"This is intolerable. I cannot understand how you come to be acquainted with what goes on or does not go on in my house. You have no right to question my relations with my private friends. I am sure the Rector will be very angry when I tell him what you have dared to say to me. You have no right to criticise me in this way."

"Mrs. Malory, I do not criticise. I uphold and admire your conduct. You at least do not condone the offence this poor wretch has committed."

"I refuse to understand your meaning, Mr. Simpson."

There was a moment's silence. Madeleine knew that she should now rise and dismiss Mr. Simpson before he had time to draw from her the admission she had already made in every way but speech.

But other considerations held her back from the promptings of her dignity. Curiosity, and a real alarm at the threat to Lena's comfort and happiness, were blended with an irresistible desire to know how far her own suspicions of Mary's case were well founded. What exactly had Mr. Simpson heard? Madeleine herself had wondered and guessed, but had never spoken even to Genevieve or to Lady Dale about her conjectures. In the first place, she knew that Richard would not approve of any talk of the kind coming from his wife. But a second and more potent consideration had kept her silent. Madeleine did not care to admit, even to herself, that James Towyn had paid any attention to Georgina's governess, or that his constant visits to the Rectory during the month he had spent at Malquoits two summers ago were paid to anyone but herself, with Ettie as a playful blind. Her jealousy of Mary had been none the less violent and penetrating that it was so deeply muffled. Now that its causes were dispersed (even her beauty had now failed the girl who no longer stood between Madeleine and any attention she wished to attract), the opportunity for obtaining from outside a justification for her own dislike was too strong a temptation to be overcome. So when, after a pause, Mr. Simpson, laying on the floor beside his umbrella the hat he had brought with him into the drawing-room, said, "It is my duty to ignore your refusal," Madeleine lowered her eyelids and allowed herself to be told.

Mr. Simpson had heard things. His duties made him a listener to many tales that never reached the ears of so guarded and innocent a lady as Mrs. Malory. The main source of these rumours was the lodge-keeper's brother, who was once more on holiday at the gates of Malquoits and had reported what he had seen. He was valet to the Earl of Merstham. Mr. Simpson mentioned that name, and Madeleine recognised it as being that of a cousin of the Towyns. This young man had recognised the young woman he had seen accompanying the little young lady from the Rectory when he had stayed with his sister two years ago.

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He had seen her at the races ; at Ranelagh ; in boxes at theatres ; in the company of notorious women whose names Mr. Simpson preferred to ignore. It was well known that she was living under the protection of someone who should be nameless. That, in these circumstances, she should have dared to return to Queen's Beaton was a proof of her hardened impudence. No one believed that Miss Quibell was aware of what had been happening ; but the fathers of Queen's Beaton's respectable families were united in feeling that something should be done to preserve their children from the contamination of such a presence in their midst.

"Hardened and unrepentant as she is," said Mr. Simpson, "her influence cannot but spread."

"And have Dobbs and Brentwood really refused to supply the ladies at the Little Chantry on account of Miss Paradise being there again?" asked Madeleine, hardly able to believe in this singular attitude on the part of the stolid tradesmen of the town.

"Not yet, not yet. But, under guidance, they will undoubtedly be persuaded to do so," said Mr. Simpson, making it abundantly clear from whence that guidance might be expected to reach these obedient strivers after righteousness.

"But surely, Mr. Simpson, you will not, you cannot, encourage them in such impertinence? I am sure the Rector would disapprove. I am sure he would be very much annoyed about the talk, and wish it to be discouraged."

"The policy of the ostrich," said Mr. Simpson, "is one I have never been able to adopt. That is why I have come to you, Mrs. Malory. Painful as it is for me to speak to you of such things, I feel that you may possibly join me in the work of bringing this sinner to repentance. Repentance and confession, followed by a withdrawal, are the only means of appeasing the wrath of Almighty God."

"You mean," faltered Madeleine, "that if Miss Paradise were to be truly repentant and to leave Queen's Beaton, you would not advise Dobbs and Brentwood to——"

"In no other way," proclaimed the avenger, "can the corruption be rooted out from our midst."

Madeleine had not time to enquire whether this referred to the withdrawal of Mary or of supplies from Little Chantry House before she was startled by the curate's further pronouncement.

"Only thus, Mrs. Malory, will your innocent child be safe from the contamination of guilt when she takes her walks abroad. You may possibly be unaware that the young woman is now allowed to show herself out of doors in broad daylight."

"Ettie will have to play in the garden for the present," said Madeleine, capitulating at last.

Mr. Simpson departed in triumph, having secured Mrs. Malory's promise to ask the Rector to speak to Miss Quibell. The less difficult though more important mission of attacking the sinner in person he reserved for himself.

"You are sure," said the Rector, "that the poor child did, for a time at any rate, believe herself to be actually married to him?"

"No," said Lena, "there was some sort of bogus ceremony arranged by the woman who enticed her away from Mrs. Pristy's care that overcame her scruples, such as they were. She certainly hoped that he would marry her one day, and Miss Martin still believes that but for his unexpected succession—when his uncle died last year—this would have happened."

The Rector shook his head.

"It is a bad business," he said at last. "If it had been a girl from any other neighbourhood—I cannot exonerate myself, knowing what I do about the young man, that I allowed his visits to the Rectory. It was weak of me—I should have put my foot down at first. But it amused Madeleine, and he was charming with the little girls—charming. The danger to Mary did not present itself to my mind. I do not remember ever to have seen him speak to her."

"But I did," cried Lena, "I knew. You must not blame yourself. Madeleine, after all, did her best in sending Mary away from the Rectory."

"That was for other reasons."

Lena did not contradict him. The purity of Madeleine's motive in getting rid of Mary was not in question.

"Madeleine is not to blame," she said.

"She blames herself," said the Rector ; "she feels she should have warned you. She tells me that when she was in London, Lady Dale had some story of an entanglement such as is, I am afraid, only too common in like cases. But of course Madeleine herself is far too pure and innocent to understand or suspect such things. It has all been a great shock to her. If only Simpson were less zealous. He is a man born out of his proper age. He would have been happy witch-hunting. Now that he has got hold of the story there can be no stopping it."

"I am afraid it has only reached Mr. Simpson after passing through a great many channels. Matilda came to me yesterday with some unbelievable tale that she would have to bake our household bread in future, as the baker's boy had been rude to her about Mary. Matilda has always been very much a devotee of Mr. Simpson. She has attended his Bible Class for years. I didn't quite follow her when she said she was going to give Mr. Simpson what for on account of the baker's boy. But now I begin to understand. I'm afraid this business is making trouble in ways we could never have foreseen."

"That," said the Rector, with some fretfulness, "is the worst of these things. The way of transgressors may be hard for the transgressors themselves, but it is often just as difficult for the perfectly innocent people who get involved with them. This business about Matilda and the baker's boy has annoyed me more than I can say."

"You had heard of it ?"

"I had not meant to tell you. Madeleine told me that Simpson was urging the tradespeople to combine in a sort

of inverted boycott. I have put a stop to that. I am glad to hear that Matilda is going to rebuke Simpson. It will surprise him, whereas any remonstrance from me has the disadvantage of being expected and prepared for."

"It is worse than I feared. I had hoped that, as we ourselves were uncertain—until Mary's return left us no doubt—that everybody else must be quite unaware. But lately there has been so marked a falling off among our most regular customers—Miss Martin puts it down to the general mourning, but I have not been able to deceive myself——" She paused, and then, answering Mr. Malory's unspoken thought, "Mary has nowhere else to go. I cannot send her back to Switzerland to her young cousins. A situation for her is out of the question, even if she were strong enough to take one."

"Is her health seriously affected?"

"Dr. MacFarlane has seen her. He thinks the lungs are delicate—that there may be disease. He is not sure. She coughs a great deal at night."

"That, in a way," said Mr. Malory, "is a good thing. If her health is poor, it will be easier to send her away for a time while we consider the best way of providing a future for her."

"She has no means other than the allowance I am forbidden to make her unless she remains with me. I have already had some trouble with the trustees about it, but so far I have satisfied them—by letter. If they should hear—or investigate——"

"It is almost as though her father had foreseen."

"Mr. Paradise had very strong opinions about the protection of young girls."

"And a very high opinion of your wisdom."

"Alas! how miserably I have failed."

"No, dear Lena," the Rector comforted her, "it is not your failure. You have been kindness and loyalty itself. It is society, in self-protection, that is punishing you for the sin of others."

"Oh, but you do not know," she said. "There was sin in my own heart. I willed that these things should be. I knew the risk. I did not prevent it. All that was thwarted in my own life stood between Mary and me. I, who should have warned and restrained her from the outset, stood aside, persuaded myself that youth must have its way. I buoyed myself with the false hope that her loveliness would be stronger than the forces that have come between them. I saw the depths of his feeling for her. He seemed beautiful to her, not to be denied. I let myself hope for the fairy-tale ending, forgetting the conditions of hardness and denial that make the fairy-tale a true example. I have allowed Mary to wander, and now she is ill, disgraced, deserted. And poor little Christie—I have brought confusion and contempt into her life—her life that was so happy, so useful."

"But surely," said the Rector, dismayed by this outburst from the woman whom he had for years admired for her wisdom and calmness, "in sending her to Shropshire you were doing what was very wise—and you believed her to be under good protection with this Mrs. Veale——"

"I do not even know if Mrs. Veale exists—she is no more than a name to us—whoever she may be, she is unfit—she is a betrayer. That we have always known."

"I am at a loss"—Mr. Malory changed the subject, unable to find any comment for this fresh revelation—"I fail to understand why, in breaking off with her—as it was only right for him to do before his betrothal and marriage—why some provision was not made. It is, I believe, usual and even expedient. Has nothing been said or done . . . ?"

"Nothing," said Lena. "Mary came back to us with no more money than was left from a small sum I had given her in the spring, after she had paid for her journey. Such clothes and jewels as may have been hers she left behind her. Where, I do not know. We have not questioned her on this point. Neither Miss Martin nor I could have allowed her to accept anything. I do not think the idea of doing so ever presented itself to her."

"You do not know if such an offer were even made?"

"I know nothing. I do know that, even when she was living in the greatest luxury, she had no money of her own. She applied to me for her allowance. I—I—there was nothing I could do but let her have it."

"It is a point," said Mr. Malory, forbearing to say that here at least Lena had erred in not using her control of the purse-strings as a means of drawing Mary back, "she has gained no advantage from her sin."

"No material advantage—but she had her heart's desire."

"You believe she loved him—that it was not merely a young girl's bedazzled foolishness?"

"She is dying for love," said Lena.

"But I thought her health had improved. She is able to go out walking."

"I see her every day," said Lena; "it breaks my heart."

The door of the parlour where they sat was flung open, and Mary came in swiftly. Two crimson spots blazed in her cheeks; her eyes were bright with fever. She was wearing her outdoor clothes, but the strings of her bonnet and the brooch that fastened her collar were undone, as though she had torn at them to relieve her choking breath.

Mr. Malory, who had not seen her for some weeks, was shocked at the change in her face. It had grown so thin that the lips were drawn back from her teeth in a vacant and perpetual smile. She took no notice of Mr. Malory, but with outspread, fluttering hands came and stood by Lena's chair.

"Oh, Aunt Lena," she gasped, swaying sideways as if blown by some invisible wind, "Mr. Simpson—he has—he says I have taken the wages of sin—— It isn't true—Aunt Lena—Aunt Lena—I would not—I did not. Bella had everything. The money—she kept it. She said I was too ill. He says the wages of sin—the fire of Hell—Aunt Lena—tell him—tell him."

A fit of coughing choked her words. Lena rose and took her in her arms.

"Mary—Mary," she said trying to soothe her.

Mr. Malory rang for a glass of water.

Suddenly the sound of the coughing changed. There was a hissing, gurgling choke—then a pause—then another paroxysm. Mary slid to the floor, and Lena's grey dress from shoulder to knee was bright with frothing, scarlet blood.

CHAPTER X

WEDDING BELLS

I

The great chestnut-tree in the churchyard was in full bloom by the end of April that year.

From the window of Mary's bedroom nothing could be seen but the deep pavilions of its branches, crested and plumed with feathery towers of white. The sun poured over the leaves all day, and in its warmth the red fleck at the heart of each separate floret on the straight stems of the flowers signalled to the droning bees, who came and went from well to honeyed well. Round the lattice the yellow jasmine stars shone bright against the dark pattern of the ivy, and below, in the garden, the tulips of May were already showing the purple blackness at the bottom of their cups as their petals stretched and flattened to the sun.

The bowls of primroses that Lena had replenished daily for the past weeks were now full of paler flowers, tinged with pink. Soon there would be no more primroses, and tall jars would have to be brought upstairs to hold the bluebells that were already breaking through last year's tangle of bracken in the woods and coppices above the valley.

Mary lay, propped with cushions, fighting hour by hour for the breath that could not torture her for many more days now. She was so wasted by fever that her skin was an almost transparent film over the blue veins in her temples and the smooth bones of her skull and jaws. Her hair had been cut short. It lay in damp rings on her brow, and clung to the pillows on each side of her restless head as she turned it, this way and that, in the pauses of her struggle for breath.

The thin gold chain around her neck hung taut, like a sling, drawn by the weight of Mary's left hand clenched upon the ring, into which the third finger was thrust. She had kept it thus for days, not withdrawing it when she slept or while the ministrations of sickness were being performed for her by Lena or Miss Martin. No one else had seen it there. When Matilda entered the room or when the doctor came in for his daily ineffectual call, Mary drew the folds of the white Shetland shawl she wore, more closely across her shoulders and buried her hand, fettered and powerless, deeper in the lawn frilling of her nightdress. Only Lena knew on what occasion and by whom that hidden circlet had been passed over the frail and almost fleshless bone it now surrounded.

Mary had rallied at first from the collapse that followed Mr. Simpson's attack on her. A few days' rest and care restored her to some possibility of active life. But March came in bleak and stormy, with gales and a scatter of snow, and confined her to the house for good.

One night Lena, sleeping lightly now as always, was awakened by a sudden drop in the temperature, and heard Mary coughing in the next room. She got out of bed, put on her dressing-gown and slippers, and went to see if the girl needed anything. But as she stood listening by the door Mary grew quieter and seemed to have sunk into sleep again.

Back in her own room, Lena went to the window and, drawing aside the curtain, saw that the ground was white with frost. An old moon rising late behind the house cast a faint, greyish light on the churchyard, where the grave-stones leaned, blank shades beneath the leafless chestnut branches. As she stood there, huddled in the silence, the criss-cross of the closed lattice clouded by her breath, the scene below took on the quality of the dream from which she had been roused that summer-night when the phantom horse she had seen in her vision became the horse

whose very hoofs had come galloping up the deserted street.

For a moment she stood there, held in the cold and the darkness by she knew not what expectation. Then she saw that the white frost on the grass beyond the garden wall was broken by the tracks of footprints, dark on the powdered ground. Her mind turned back to the memory of its awakening. The cold had carried a sound, the sound of footsteps crackling faintly over frost. She passed the hanging sleeve of her gown over the clouded diamonds of the lattice and peered through a clear pane, searching the shadows beneath the chestnut-tree for the presence she still did not believe could be there. But, as her eyes explored the grey-ness, she saw it darken and solidify into a figure that stood close under the wide branches, hiding its own blackness against the blackness of the tree-trunk behind it. The pale glimmer of an upturned face grew out of the interlacing shades. The rider of that midsummer night was come back in this bitter frost of spring to watch—with what folly, what regret?—the house he had not dared to enter then, and could not wish to enter now. Then he had achieved his object. Then, by means of some preconcerted signal or through no other agency than that of the mutual passion that drew each to the other, he had made his presence known to the girl who now lay exhausted and unaware behind the closed window of her sick-room. What if, ignorant of her condition, or prompted by the vanity that cannot relinquish entirely the captive it no longer cares to hold at its side, he had come with the design of seeing or speaking with Mary again? What if there were some other unbelievable purpose behind this midnight vigil? How had he come there? How would he leave? She had heard no noise of an approaching horse: her sleep had been broken by the cold and by the dull sound of Mary's coughing that once again broke the stillness. She listened to the dreadful rhythm, with its implication of effort, that brought no relief, its promise of another crisis and another to follow, wave

after wave of a tide there was no staying. Could he hear it? Did any faintest beat reach him of the sound that was Mary's life-breath spending itself so quickly now that its duration must be counted in weeks only? It ceased. Mary was at peace again for a time. Soon, before it should begin again, to wake her perhaps, and leave her lying exhausted but with sharpened senses, he must be warned; must leave his hiding-place that was no hiding-place once any watcher suspected his presence there. Wrapping her heavy grey gown closely round her, Lena felt her way down through the darkened house and out into the street. She did not go out into the garden through the house door, lest the pulling of bolts and the clank of the falling chain that secured it should rouse Miss Martin, whose window was immediately above the porch. Crossing the hall, she let herself out by the street door. Her soft house-shoes made no sound on the flagstones of the churchyard path as she walked swiftly from the lych-gate towards the chestnut-tree, skirting the tombstones and the smaller graves on the farther side with silent, hurrying steps.

He stood folded in his cloak, black against the black tree-trunk, his face raised towards the distant window, where the wavering of the night-light that burned in Mary's room moved like smoke in the folds of the window-curtains behind the lattice. Lena came unheard to within a yard of him before she spoke. Then in a low voice, using the name by which she had always heard of him, she called twice:

"James Towyn! James Towyn!"

He turned his head towards the voice.

"Who is it?" he asked slowly, neither startled nor alarmed, as one who has the right to be where he pleases at all times.

"You cannot stay here. You cannot watch her window any longer. Come away!"

"You have her voice—but it is not Mary speaking."

"She has no voice to speak to you as I am speaking now. Come away, lest she hear you."

"If she could . . . She is there—within?"

"Did you not know it? Why else have you come here?"

"They told me she had gone. Was happy in forgetting me. I have come to say farewell to an intolerable memory. Is she there?"

"Come away, and I will tell you. Come away, lest she hear your voice and open her window to the night air."

The old moon had climbed above the house-top now, and its wizened quarter shed a grey light on him as he stepped out of the shadow over the wintry grass.

"Who are you?" he repeated to the hooded figure that moved towards him, beckoning him away.

She did not answer, and he followed her without further question.

In the hall, lit by one candle that smoked and guttered in the chill draught that had crept in through the door she had left open behind her as she went, they faced one another. She saw the fretful weakness of the beautiful face; saw the lines that self-indulgence had already drawn about the arrogant mouth; saw the impatient suffering of the blue eyes that met her own with a gaze that questioned but did not ask for pardon.

In low, hurried questions he drew from her the tale of Mary's return, only by implication giving her any account of his own desertion and the machinations that had made it so complete. Unhappy as he was, his resentment was for his own rather than for Mary's pain. That she was ill seemed to him a light matter by comparison with his relief that she had not placed herself under the protection of another man. His concern that she was without the aid of such provision as he had made for her expressed itself in terms of contempt for those who had appropriated his gifts. His very presence beneath her window was explained as the outcome of restlessness and *maní* during the two days of a farewell visit to

his mother at Malquoits, a visit that would end next morning. He spoke with bitterness of his own lot that hampered his choice and put a rein on his inclinations. Somewhere in the tale that grew out of their muttered colloquy the serpent of a jealous quarrel raised its head for an instant, as if throwing the blame for his abandonment on Mary herself. He longed for her still, but it was his own release from that longing he had come to find. The news that she was in Queen's Beaton had reached him ; he had hoped for some impossible reconciliation, some renewal in farewell of the bonds he himself had broken.

"I must see her now," he said.

"You cannot see her now. To-morrow when you go, it must be for ever."

"I must bid her farewell. When I left her in Torquay I did not say good-bye."

"You had not that courage."

"I feared her grief."

"She has borne it alone."

"Does she reproach me for it ? "

"I have never heard her speak your name."

"She has forgotten me already ? "

"She will remember you while her life lasts."

He pressed a white hand to his eyes for a moment.

"I too," he whispered.

The cloak he had unclasped as he entered the hall slipped from his shoulders, and he stood tall and hidden in the black of his dress-suit, the candle-flame moving like a speck of golden dust over the gleaming surface of his shirt, showing his face shadowed and spectral above it.

"You must go now," she urged. "Now, while your going may be unobserved, before Mary can wake and know you are here."

"You will tell her that I came—that my one longing is for her forgiveness—that I came to ask it ? "

"It was given—always. You cannot add to your remorse—surely you feel remorse ; you cannot add the guilt of

disturbing such peace as she has made for herself—with us—here."

"But she must know. She must be told that I came. That the vows I am soon to make will be empty. That my heart is hers alone."

Lena was silent. There was no answer to this vanity ; no reasoning with the cruelty of an egoism that would torture the dying for its own assuagement. She made a gesture of dismissal, moving towards the door. As she turned there was the sound of a latch raised in the gallery behind her. She looked back. Mary was standing at the head of the staircase.

She stood there in her long night-clothes, holding the saucer in which the night-light burned. Its flame, blown in the current of air that rose from the hall, lay flat above the water in which it floated, and licked it with a faint and whispering caress. The sound reached them as they watched her, silent and motionless in their fear and surprise.

Before Lena could recover herself, he had climbed the staircase and taken Mary in his arms. The saucer in her hand tilted, so that water dropped over the hand-rail glittering in the light as each drop flashed down to the flagstones. Lena ran forward, holding out the skirts of her robe to catch the saucer as it fell, lest the crash of breaking china should rouse the house.

The unextinguished flame scorched the cloth as she smothered it, and filled her gown with the smell of hot wax and smouldering wool.

Running to the table, she caught up the candle-stick and bore it swiftly to the staircase to light him as he carried Mary back to her room.

Lena stood holding the candle at the foot of the bed while he laid Mary among the pillows and with groping, unaccustomed hands drew the covers around her.

"Oh, my bird—my rose !" he murmured. "How do I find you ?"

Mary's eyes, bright with fever, shone enormous in her wasted face. She moved her head from side to side, striving for utterance. Her parched mouth widened to a smile. Twice she gasped for breath, and then—a hoarse whisper grated its way from her throat.

“Jamie—Janie.”

He knelt beside her, one arm around her shoulder.

“They tell me you have kept nothing of mine, nothing that I gave you—cruel Mary.”

Her thin hand groped in her bosom, drawing forth the ring on its slender chain.

“Only this.”

He took it in one palm.

“You must wear it now.”

But he could not move his arm to pass the chain over her head, so with his free hand he slipped the ring over the gleaming bone that was her finger now.

“Mine own,” he murmured, bending to kiss the hand with the ring on it.

Mary stirred and raised herself in his arm. A little cough shook her. Her eyes, which had not left his face, now gazed away from him, looking at Lena, but seeing something beyond.

“Lights !” she said. “Music !” and her voice was clear. “Listen !” she said, raising herself still further.

A thread-like singing, the wraith of her once clear, young voice, rose in the heavy air of the room.

“*Ah, fors é lui che l'anima,*” sang Mary, reliving a Parisian night, linking her own fate with that of the lost one she had never thought to resemble.

Lena crossed the room and lit the candles on the dressing-table. She could see, shadowed in the mirror, the piled masses of the pillows, and Mary's face and eyes burning among them. No sound came from the bed now, but the mouth still sang, forming the words she alone could hear.

Presently the silent miming was broken by a little cough that made a way for the straining voice.

"*Misterioso—Misterioso altero.*" The thin whisper faltered and died away. Mary sank back into her lover's arms.

"*Mario mio!*" she breathed.

"Violetta—Violetta-Maria," came the reply.

It was the little language of tender names they had made or their passion. They were speaking it again now, when all passion was useless.

Lena did not stay to hear it. As she pulled the door to behind her, she thought she heard the faint click of a latch at the other end of the passage. She listened, waiting to know if Christie stirred. But silence closed about her, and there was no chink of light round the doorway of Miss Martin's room.

Leaning against the railing of the gallery, she kept vigil for a time that she could not measure. No sound came from the closed door of Mary's room. Her own door stood ajar, and as her pupils widened to the darkness she could see the grey shadow of the window behind its curtain, lit by the waning moon outside.

She heard the muffled bell of the church clock strike one, but whether it were the hour or the half-hour she had no means of knowing. Before it struck again he was with her, a candle in his hand. She followed him down the stairs and across the hall. At the door he turned and spoke.

"She is asleep," he said; "she has slept for some time. I shall be gone at daybreak."

Lena did not answer him. Silently she undid the door, and blew out the candle as he opened it. Then, alone in the darkness, she felt for lock and bar and chain and fastened the house against the world.

The frost melted into a windy rain. It blew in sheets and gusts about the hill, and died down to a wet mist, soaking town and garden and the woods and meadows outside the

town. On the third day, spring came with hot sunshine that sucked the water from the soil and covered the landscape with a green veil of breaking leaf and thrusting grass.

"We shall have our invalid about again now," said Dr. MacFarlane, with the factitious cheerfulness of a good bedside manner.

"No, doctor," said Miss Martin, as they left the room together, "Mary is happy now. But she will not recover."

The doctor looked at her.

"She has rallied since last week," he said.

"She is buoyed by a false hope," said Miss Martin. "And that will fail her soon."

When the doctor had gone, Lena asked :

"You knew then ? "

"Yes, Lena—I saw him carry her from the gallery."

"You did not come out ? "

"No. There was no occasion. Even you had no business with them at that hour."

"Has she spoken of it to you ? "

"I have seen the ring on her hand, Lena."

"What can we do ? "

"We can do nothing. She does not need us any more."

Mr. Malory came, and offered to administer the last sacraments, but Lena hesitated. "I think it might frighten her," she said. "She has found her own peace. I dare not trouble it with any reminder of the laws she has broken—the blessings she has evaded. Christie and I will come on Easter Day and offer our prayers for her."

There was kindness now for Mary. Fruit and flowers from the Squire's hot-houses were left with Mrs. Bartram's kind enquiries. The Misses Linden stepped up the hill with calves' foot jelly, quivering under a white napkin in a porcelain bowl. Madeleine called often, and once brought a bunch of very short-stemmed daisies, twisted in a paper bag, with Ettie's love. Lena stuck these carefully in a saucer of damp moss and set them by Mary's bed ; but she paid no heed to them. A special messenger had ridden up the hill

that morning with a box full of dark violets in heavy bunches. She lay with them piled on either side of her pillow, breathing in their scent the thoughts and the memories they carried. Twice again the groom came with the same burden—and then no more.

“It is too late for violets now,” said Miss Martin.

When Easter was over, Madeleine had news. “We are asked to the wedding,” she said. “It is to be in London on the second of May. Lasceline is not pleased, she is superstitious, but the bridegroom is to join the Prince on his return from Egypt and the Holy Land, and Lady Gervaise will not hear of the ceremony being postponed any longer. It will be dull for Lasceline, being a bride this year, with no Courts. They are going down to St. Germans for their honeymoon, and Merioneth House is being refurnished for them. Aunt Amelia says it is in quite shocking style now. It has not been touched since Queen Anne died. It is full of black and gold cabinets and Chinese screens—quite too utterly old-fashioned. They say he doesn’t take the slightest interest in it; it is all left to Lasceline. Of course, as it is her money that is being spent I think it rather nice of him to leave it all to her taste, don’t you agree, Lena?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lena, “but, then, a bride usually chooses some at least of her furnishings. You will see the New Exhibition, Madeleine?”

“We are going up to-morrow for a fortnight beforehand. Richard is coming too. He knew the Duke of Cambridge, and wants to see him taking up his public duties. But he is so odd. He says he will not go to the wedding. I shall have new clothes—two complete outfits at the very least—one for the opening of the Exhibition, and my new summer toilette for the wedding next day. I shall be full of news when I return.”

“I’m afraid,” said Lena, “that we shall disturb Mary if we talk here much longer. Her window is just above us.”

They were sitting in the parlour by the open window, and Madeleine, in her excitement, had raised her never very quiet voice as she talked.

"Oh, dear. I am so sorry. How is poor Mary? Revived by this glorious spring weather, I hope?"

"The sunshine cheers us all—but Mary is very ill."

"Do you mean to say, Lena, that her window is wide open while she lies in bed?"

"She needs air—her door stands open too. Her breathing has become very difficult."

"It seems all wrong to me, with chest trouble," sighed Madeleine, "but then—fortunately for me—I have had so little to do with illness; I know next to nothing about it. I always keep the nursery positively hermetically sealed if Ettie has the slightest sign of a cold. I may be wrong—but that is my way."

Lena let her go, still chattering of her own affairs. They passed through the hall on their way.

"We leave to-morrow, dear Lena. Will you say good-bye for me to Miss Martin? She does not seem to be here."

"I daresay Christie has gone upstairs to Mary," said Lena. "She may have heard her cough."

"Why," exclaimed Madeleine, putting up her sunshade in the porch, "the Castle Gates are open. I suppose Lady Gervaise is going to drive out. Will that, do you suppose, explain Miss Martin's disappearance?"

"I hardly think so," said Lena. "And I must send you away now, Madeleine. I am sure you will enjoy your visit to London in every way."

Madeleine trailed down High Street with languid elegance. She was already feeling the influence of London and fashion and the delights to come. The release from the winter of mourning, the lightness of last year's spring costume, newly released from its camphorated hibernation, and now so joyously floating over its crinoline around her person, combined with the mild and sunny air and her

prospective gaiety to make her mood a pleasant one. The one slight check to her complacent enjoyment of life had been Lena's rather double-edged farewell. Lena was really getting very old-maidish and censorious. It was a pity. Of course, she was worried about Mary—Madeleine hastily turned her thoughts away from Mary.—There were aspects of her own dealings with the dying girl she never allowed herself to consider. And the library and emporium were not what they had been. Miss Martin was behind the times, dear little thing. She still went on with Berlin wool and cross-stitch patterns and had not even heard of crazy-work, and of course her management of the library had always been absurd. She had probably left the place to take care of itself this morning while Lena was in the parlour and had dashed out to catch the eye of Lady Gervaise Towyn. Madeleine could hear the Malquoits barouche coming down the hill behind her. She quickened her steps a little, and turned into the Rectory drive before the carriage could overtake her.

But Miss Martin had not gone out to bow to Lady Gervaise ; indeed, when Lena found her at Mary's bedside she doubted whether Christie had seen that the gates were open.

"Mary heard Madeleine talking in the parlour," she said, as Lena came in ; "she wants you to tell her something."

Lena bent over to catch the whispering sound.

"She is too late," gasped Mary with a burning smile. "The wedding is over."

3

For ten days Mr. Simpson had run the parish single-handed, preaching all the sermons, visiting all the sick himself. Into Mary's room only he did not penetrate. Once he had called, in spite of Mr. Malory's parting injunction

to leave Little Chantry House unvisited. But Matilda had refused to admit him.

"Nobody is seeing Miss Mary but the two ladies and me," she boasted. "Miss Martin is in the library. You can go round by the public entrance and ask her. But it won't be no good."

Mr. Simpson took her at her word. He did not care to risk a public defeat, and he had seen two people go into the hall as he came up. He had always been doubtful about the library himself. He did not approve of secular reading. The whole atmosphere of Little Chantry House was, he felt, subversive : more particularly since Miss Quibell had come there : most pronouncedly since the advent of the unfortunate girl to whom the last consolations were now being denied. As for Matilda Jones, once the most docile and attentive of sheep, Mr. Simpson was at a loss—or, rather, he was only too sure of what would happen to her. Still, it was disturbing. Consigning the soul and some quite definitely sentient remnant of the body of Matilda Jones to everlasting fire did him very little good. Mr. Simpson did not question the reality of life and punishment beyond the grave : but at the same time it was unpleasant to be thwarted on earth. And the situation that had arisen in Queen's Beaton on account of the unknown, insignificant, apparently harmless young girl who had come there two years ago was involving Mr. Simpson's prestige. He did not like it at all. To do him justice, he would, on the whole, prefer to save a soul. To pronounce its damnation, though it relieved his feelings, was, in a way, an admission of failure. The master whom Mr. Simpson devoutly believed he was serving had gone out and brought His sheep back to the fold. There was an awkward text that spoke quite plainly, saying, "There is *more* joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, than over ninety and nine just persons who heed no repentance." The thought that he himself was one of the ninety and nine did not comfort Mr. Simpson as it should have done. He was conscious of losing

credit in Heaven over this business. The Devil, in the unlikely disguise of two maiden ladies, was proving stronger than Mr. Simpson, panoplied in the whole armour of righteousness. Something must be done about it. Mr. Simpson was genuinely worried. He decided to make it a matter of prayer.

But, before he had found time to collect his thoughts regarding a situation which appeared increasingly difficult as he tried to put it into words suitable for the attention of the Almighty, help came from an unexpected quarter.

Mrs. Bartram had not been invited to the wedding, and she did not intend to bestir herself to go to London for the Exhibition, though the Squire thought he might do so. But at the same time, as the head of Society in Queen's Beaton, and so in a way the official opponent of the Malquoits tradition, it was her business to see that that tradition was not violated in any important respect. The males of the Malquoits family occupied their canopied pew on given occasions, and the church bells were rung for their births, their weddings, and their deaths. It was sixty years and more since a son had been born at the Castle, and Mrs. Bartram had been a very little girl when the old lord was married. But everybody remembered the tolling for his death, though Mr. Simpson had not yet come to the parish when that happened, nor, for that matter, had Mr. Malory. The Rector had had the church bells tolled for the old Duke ; had he arranged to have them rung for this wedding ? That was what Mrs. Bartram wanted to know.

Mr. Simpson was obliged to admit that nothing had been said about this before Mr. Malory went away. In fact, nothing had been said about the bells at all, though, as Mr. Simpson knew only too well, the Rector had given orders that there was to be as little ringing as possible while there was illness at the Chantry House. This, however, Mr. Simpson did not mention to Mrs. Bartram. Nor did Mrs. Bartram herself openly refer to Mary.

But, when she had obtained Mr. Simpson's assurance

that a peal of bells should be rung for half an hour on the morning of the young Duke's wedding, and that due notice of this should be given on the coming Sunday, she added, in bidding him farewell :

"It can do nothing but good for it to be publicly known on what side Queen's Beaton stands in all questions affecting morality and regular unions."

"Ah—Mrs. Bartram," said Mr. Simpson, "If only all persons were as clear-sighted as you and as firm in the cause of righteousness. I shall make it a matter of earnest prayer that the Lord will make our humble rejoicings the means of bringing repentance for transgression home to those sinners who most need to find salvation."

But whether Mr. Simpson's God did not exist and so could not hear his prayer, or whether, though existing, He chose to deal with His sinner, Mary Paradise, in a more merciful way, are questions those who have read her story must answer for themselves. For, loudly as the bells that rocked the steeple on that wedding morning rang, she did not hear them. Lena, creeping in at dawn to see if she were asleep, found Mary lying, her left hand still at her breast, with her head turned towards the window, as though she had heard a call and had answered it for the last time.

The bells were still pealing when they laid her out in fresh linen, with jessamine and wild-cherry blossom at her feet and on her pillow. Lena had brought the flowers in from the garden after the midwife who performed the last offices had gone away.

They had closed the lattice now, and drawn the rose-sprinkled curtains across them. But the sun outside was strong, and the noise of the bells filled the room.

"It is a good thing for that poor young bride," said Miss Martin, as she rose from kissing the cold cheek on the pillow. "A very great thing that Mary died last night."

"I suppose so," said Lena. "But she will never know it."

"But we know it," Miss Martin insisted, "so there can be nothing to fear."

Lena did not take her eyes from Mary's face.

"We fear ghosts," said Lena.

"Even if we love them?" Miss Martin pleaded.

"Most of all then," said Lena.

4

The flowers on the chestnut-tree were beginning to fall when Mary Paradise was buried in her grave beneath its branches. Some of them fell on her narrow coffin and were mixed with the earth that covered it. And all night long, as the cooling air shook through the tree, the white tears fell and covered the grass so thickly that in the morning there was no sign of a new grave among the mounds and headstones there.

Mary, who had moved so lightly and spoken so low in the world, was now still and silent among the ineffectual dead. The small place she had filled in the life of Queen's Beaton closed over as the place of a drop of water closes when it has been spilled from a bowl.

The short time she had lived there was forgotten in the long years that were remembered before she came, and encountered after she had gone. The memory of her face passed like a shadow; her name was forgotten; the story that had been whispered about her beauty died away.

But, coming unknown and going unmarked, she still left a trace in every life that had touched her own. The force of the passion that had destroyed her had not flowed through the channel of her life only. Its flood had spread into other streams, driving them from their courses, breaking here a bank, and there a bridge, that could never be restored.

The increase of prosperity, the acceleration of means of transport, that were signs of the times, would not have driven away the custom of Queen's Beaton from the library

and emporium while Miss Martin lived had it not been for the scandal of Mary's return to it. When, after her death, the ladies were at leisure to examine their business affairs again, they had to admit how grave the falling off of their regular custom had become. They faced their losses by closing the Chantry Hall altogether, and by reducing their expenditure to a minimum that brought it within the limit of their small united incomes. Matilda, though she^a never returned to Mr. Simpson's fold, was not proof against the reiterated insinuation of the butcher's boy that her good name would be impaired by every month she remained in the house where virtue received so much less honour than vice had done. Early in the summer she gave notice, and married the young man by way of re-establishing her reputation. The ladies did not replace her, but spent their energies on keeping the four rooms in which they now lived in the most perfect order, and in cooking and serving their frugal meals with a scrupulous daintiness Matilda had never achieved.

"We have far truer *luxury* now," said Miss Martin to the doctor's wife, who, with Madeleine and the Rector, were the only persons to whom they still extended their slender and infrequent hospitality.

With the Rectory the old, close intimacy was over. The shadow of Mary lay between Lena and Madeleine, heavier because it was never spoken of by either of them. Madeleine came and went as before, but less frequently. Georgina grew up and needed a chaperon. She had to be taken about—even to London once a year. So Madeleine would not be seen by either of the ladies for many weeks together. When she returned from these excursions she had other matters than the affairs of Mary Paradise to discuss.

The Rector, growing old and tired, felt Mary's shadow too, not as a bar between him and Miss Quibell, but as a darkness near the image of Madeleine herself. He was too wise, too tired, too indolent even, to look overlong into his own heart or to hasten the fading of any illusion. But the

news of Mary's death had surprised Madeleine into a momentary revelation of a character her husband had never recognised till then. It had marred the image he had formed of the young wife to whom his indulgent love had been given. And as time went on each fresh betrayal of envy or littleness ; each small, inevitable test of daily conduct ; each clash with the expanding individuality of Georgina and Ettie, added a grain to the weight of the evidence against her, so that the rift Mary's coming had made widened gradually into a chasm of which Madeleine herself at last became aware.

"Richard has ceased to love me," she complained to Lena. "He is very kind, but he no longer cares for me as he did."

"He is growing old," said Lena. "It is his turn to be cared for now."

"Oh, yes, Lena." Madeleine was impatient. "I know that. You do not understand. There are things only a wife realises. He has never been the same since we went up to London for the opening of the Exhibition and Lasceline's wedding. And he interferes with my management of the girls, as though he had lost confidence in me."

"He remembers that you are still young, and feels that you may not always be quite wise," said Lena, and this, being true, did not please Madeleine.

She never spoke to anyone about Mary after the day in October when the small headstone that marked her grave was put up.

"They have put nothing on it but the name and the day of her death. Not her age, nor any text or anything," she complained to the Rector. "Is that because she died without benefit of clergy?"

"I do not know," said the Rector, "and I do not advise you to ask anyone about it."

"You mean Mr. Simpson," Madeleine replied. "It was he who pointed it out to me. I do not go poking about among the graves myself."

"Quite so," said the Rector, and went into his study, closing the door behind him.

As the seasons visited it with sun and rain and wind and snow, the little white gravestone weathered to the colour of those about it. A jar of glazed and painted earthenware Mary had brought with her from Switzerland stood close by the headstone, and held whatever flowers or seasonable evergreens the fields and garden yielded, carried there at dusk or in the early hours of the summer morning by Lena or Miss Martin. No one ever saw them come or go. But one morning in March the flowers had been moved to the foot of the grave, and in their place, close up against the stone, lay a bunch of dark violets. The following year the same thing happened. After that, when the anniversary came round, the vase was removed before the violets were due, and until they withered no other flowers lay on the grass beneath the name of Mary Paradise who died on the morning of the second of May, 1862.

The day came when the flowers in the painted jar withered and were not removed, and the moist grass grew high about the stone and hid the violets, if they were still laid there in the years when no one was left to watch for them any more. But, long before this last forgetfulness overtook her name, the deepest wound that Mary Paradise had left was marked in the place her life had failed to enter.

Alone in the Castle where her son no longer came ; unvisited by his sickly Duchess, who spent her days almost entirely in developing the Cornish gardens on the most remote of all her husband's estates, Lady Gervaise Towyn grew old in the ways she had made for herself.

From time to time on sunny afternoons she would drive out through Castle Gate and down Queen's Beaton High Street into the alien country that did not acknowledge her. But neither on her way out, nor when her trampling horses drew her carriage up the hill on her return, was she called

upon to see and answer the eager, side-stepping bow of little Miss Martin. And if her keen eyes, accustomed to the salute, ever chanced to catch a glimpse of the once familiar figure, it was only its back they saw : the back of a frail and hurrying old lady disappearing down a side-street or raising a thin hand to knock at some possibly friendly door.